Persona 4: Garden of Souls

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"The power of the Demon's Eyes may be a valuable tool, but be ever mindful of the people around you... The truth sometimes hurts more than the lies." - Yuka Narukami hoped to escape her past life, to get a fresh start. Instead, she finds herself thrown back into the world of shadows, and this time... There may be no salvation. [Yuka X Rise]

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Prologue

~ ***Prologue: Bloom of the Flower*** ~

I still remember that day. To be honest, I had a feeling that I would have had to do something about the Shadow that appeared. I didn't expect how I would be used, however. We had seen horrors beyond our imagination. His dark side exposed to everyone. Shadows by the dozens swarmed into the room we were in, aiming to snuff out our lives.

And then, he came back. Her in hand. I didn't look at him, though I heard his arrival, thanks to everyone else. I was too busy keeping those Shadows at bay along with the others. Then, a horrible cry sounded out. Every Shadow in the room was obliterated – their masks cracked and shattered, they turned into sludge and disappeared in a fine mist.

The sound was loud enough to force everyone in the room besides the boy to cover their ears in agony. I covered my ears as well, though I seemed to have gotten off more lucky than the others. Their ears bled as the sound continued to drill into our heads – one of them even fainted from the noise.

Everyone that was still standing begged for the boy to stop. I remember what I said to him:

"Stop it! You've done enough!"

But to him, it wasn't enough. He ignored our pleas and summoned another of his Personas. It happened so fast, nobody could do anything to stop him. The noise stunned everyone into place. They might as well have been rocks at that point. Since I was but a pebble compared to them, Oumitsunu had no trouble picking me up.

He charged through the darkness and into a room. Lightning danced around the room like it was performing a puppet show. At the centre of it all was a mask – the mask of the Hermit, to be precise. A searing pain coursed through my body unrelentingly, burning my

insides and charring my skin. It was hell... It was hell... It was a hell that I was forced through.

To stop that hell, I had to use something powerful. Something forbidden. Something that I knew was dangerous. I didn't care. I just wanted that hell to stop. To stop the pain. My screams were loud enough to destroy windows, loud enough that it could possibly be heard from the other side of the city.

Despite that, I managed to call out those trigger words. The words my mother taught me in order to control this power. Until the time came when I would be able to control it on my own. My mother was always apprehensive about letting me fight the Shadows. I never understood the reasons why she tried to stop me.

In that moment, I finally understood partly the reason why she was adamant about protecting me. It was to stop me from experiencing this hell.

Seeing the thread that composes the Shadow's life, my sword cuts through it like a weaver with its scissors. My mind didn't register this action. My body moved on its own to do this. As soon as the mask disappeared, the storm subsided. The one carrying me vanished as well, sending me falling to the ground. The damage to my body was indescribable. I had fallen unconscious almost immediately after those few seconds.

My mind struggled to catch up to reality. It was still experiencing that hell. What it registered wasn't spine-chilling terror, or the sting of his betrayal, or the unbearable pain that he put me through.

No. It told me that this pain was *familiar*. It told me that I had experienced this pain before.

But how? Why? When? When would someone like me experience a pain such as this?

I couldn't fathom why I would know such a feeling. It didn't matter at the moment how or why I knew. The stone-cold truth was that he knew full well what he did. He forced me to use something that drained away at my life.

And yet, that was a fate that was set in stone from the very beginning. It wasn't something I could change, even if I had the power to do so. It seemed as though the will of the world was leading me towards that moment. The moment where I would take my first proper step in confronting my destiny.

I didn't realise it then, however. All that was on my mind was one simple thing.

Why? I haven't done anything wrong...

~ Garden of Souls ~

Huh...? Why am I thinking about that day, of all things...?

I slowly opened my eyes as I awoke from my uneasy slumber. I was *supposed* to be on a train bound for Yasoinaba Station, but instead I found myself awaking in an unfamiliar room, sitting on a wooden chair. From what I could see, the room was tinted a velvet hue that gave the place a warm atmosphere, almost like a bar or dance hall.

The counters, the glasses and bottles certainly helped with the image as well. It was kinda like that bar in the city I used to live in before coming to Inaba.

What was it called again...? Ah, I'm sure I'll remember eventually.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," an old man's voice spoke out. I snapped to attention and tried to discern where the voice came from. The room I was in was a lot more confined than I originally thought – very narrow, very small. Looking around some more, I saw a row of windows lining the sides.

I took a peek outside and could barely see a thing. A thick layer of fog surrounded this place. I also took not of the fact that we were moving forward through this fog.

Am I in a limo...? Would certainly make sense, considering the size... What am I even doing here anyway?

"It seems we have a guest with an intriguing destiny," the old man spoke out once again. I turned to look straight ahead and saw where

the voice came from. He looked really... weird. The bit of white hair at the back of his head, the bulging bloodshot eyes and the... very, very long nose.

Oh, he also wore a black suit, with white gloves and had a handkerchief in the front pocket. Not particularly important, but it was something I had noticed. I was still trying to figure out exactly where I was.

I've seen my fair share of weird stuff, but this takes the gold.

"Who are you?" I asked, trying to keep as stoic as possible. Better not to show emotion and let the enemy take advantage of that, I've always told myself. The old man spoke with one of the creepiest smiles I'd ever seen.

"My name is Igor. I am delighted to make your acquaintance," he said, his hands clasped together and resting below his impossibly long nose. "This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter. It is a room that only those who are bound by a '*contract*' may enter... You seem to be destined to walk a different path however."

I didn't understand a word he said. A room that existed between dream and reality? Trying to make sense out of it for the moment was a futile effort, so I decided to just go along with it. Perhaps it would make sense later, I thought to myself.

"...I'm Yuka—" I started to say my name in return, but Igor interrupted me.

"There's no need to tell us who you are, Yuka Narukami," he said knowingly. I didn't let my surprise show. Instead, I raised an eyebrow. "A previous guest spoke of you. He told us that you possess an... *interesting* ability."

He pointed to the woman beside him. She had platinum blonde hair, pale skin and golden eyes. She wore dark blue clothing with matching high heels and had black and gold accessories adorn her clothing. She was, to be blunt, exceptionally beautiful. A feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that I had seen someone like her

before, but I dismissed it as a coincidence.

"This is Margaret. She's a resident here, like myself," Igor explained. The woman called Margaret turned her head to look at me directly.

"My name is Margaret. I am here to accompany you on your journey," she told me. I relaxed a little, seeing that they didn't seem to want to pick a fight, and focused on asking a very important question.

"What am I doing here?" I asked. Like every mystery I seem to come across however, I get no straight answers.

"That will be revealed to you in due time," Igor responded with that same, almost raspy, tone of voice. "Now then, why don't we take a look at your future?"

With a snap of his fingers, a deck of cards appeared on the round table in front of him. With a wave of his hand, the cards separated, all of them facing down. With the cards set in place, he asked a very simple question.

"Do you believe in fortune telling?"

I didn't answer, tensing up a little as he continued to smile.

"Each reading is done with the same cards, yet the result is always different..." He let out a chuckle. "Life itself follows the same principles, doesn't it?"

I couldn't really argue with that – he did have a point. Igor flipped over the card closest to me and to his right and looked it over.

"Hmm... The Tower in the upright position represents the immediate future. It seems a terrible catastrophe is imminent... The card indicating the future beyond that is..." He flipped over the card on the opposite side. "The Moon, in the upright position. This card represents... hesitation, and mystery. Very interesting indeed." He looked up from the table and directly at me.

"It seems you will encounter a misfortune at your destination and a great mystery will be imposed upon you," he explained. "The coming

year will be a turning point in your destiny. If the mystery goes unsolved, your future may be forever lost. My duty is to provide assistance to our guests to ensure that does not happen... But you already have the potential to see the truth of the world around us, don't you?"

Does he know about—?!

My thought process was interrupted by Margaret, who seemed to figure out what I was thinking.

"The power of the Demon's Eyes may be a valuable tool, but be ever mindful of the people around you... The truth you se can sometimes hurt more than the lies," she told me. She kept a straight face, making it difficult for me to discern the meaning from her words.

Before I could respond, the room slowly got darker and darker. It took me a second to realise that it wasn't the room itself that was going dark – it was my eyes slowly closing.

"Wait..."

As my words drifted in the air, the Velvet Room disappeared from my sight.

~ Garden of Souls ~

Ugh... That was a weird dream... How did those people know so much about me? Then again, it was a dream...

I stood up after shaking myself awake and grabbed my bag from the railing above me, between the rest of my luggage, and opened it up. I looked at the only item contained within that bag.

That book... I've carried it with me for so long and yet I don't know everything about it... I just hope I don't have to use this thing ever again. Not to mention...

I zipped the bag back up and flung it over my shoulder. Taking a glance out the window, I saw the bright and luscious countryside. The quiet town of Inaba was my next stop – a chance to get away

from the life I lived before. A chance to start fresh. I took my mobile phone out of my pocket and read the last message I received from my uncle.

'*Meet us outside Yasoinaba Station at 4 PM.*'

I've still got some time to spare... Oh, it seems that we're getting close to arriving.

"Our next stop is Yasoinaba Station. Be sure to take any luggage before departing."

Well... Here goes nothing.

~ ***Author's Note*** ~

Hello everyone, and welcome to this unique retelling of Persona 4. I was requested by my friend '*Dad of War*' to take over the Persona 4 story he was writing as the sequel to his story: '*Persona 3 – The Alternity Paradox*'. So, if you want some more background on our female protagonist here, I recommend you go read that and see what happens. Though I will be covering the major, important events involving Yuka here as well, so don't worry about feeling lost because this is a sequel.

With that said, I hope you enjoy this journey, because it is one that I'll enjoy writing.

Next Time – Chapter I: A World of Fog

Chapter I

~ ***Chapter I: A World of Fog*** ~

The train slowly came to a halt at the train station. The doors slid open, allowing me to take my first steps into Inaba. It was a very quiet place, compared to Iwatodai. Much smaller as well. For one thing, I could actually hear the birds chirping.

Not that there weren't any birds back in the city, it was just I could hear them a lot clearer now. Standing at the entrance, I looked around for my uncle, who said that he would be meeting me there.

"Hey! Over here!" I heard a male voice call out to me. Looking in the direction it came from, I saw a middle-aged man with short, greyish black hair, grey eyes and a stubble. He wore a dark grey shirt with rolled up sleeves, a red tie and a brown belt with a metal buckle along with a pair of dress pants as well as dark brown dress shoes.

I saw that he also had a black jacket which he carried over his shoulder. I didn't blame him. Wearing a jacket like that in the sun was a *horrible* idea. I walked over to him.

"Well, you certainly look different from your photo," he said with a disarming smile. "Welcome to Inaba. I'm Ryotaro Dojima. I'll be looking after you. Let's see, I'm your mother's younger brother and that about sums it up."

"It's been a long time, uncle," I said with a blank expression.

"Indeed. Haven't seen you since that incident in Iwatodai," Dojima responded. "How long has it been now? Ten years?"

"A little more than that." A few years had passed since I was last in Iwatodai. I hadn't set foot there ever since a certain incident involving one of the last schools I was at. I looked down and saw that my uncle had brought someone along with him.

Seeing where I was looking, he brought the young girl out of hiding.

She didn't look any older than six years old – she had brown hair, short pigtails and brown eyes. She was wearing a white turtleneck shirt under a sleeveless pink dress with two shades of red, white socks and pink shoes. She looked around before her sight settled on me.

"This here's my daughter. C'mon, Nanako, say hello to your cousin," Dojima encouraged her. She barely made eye contact with me before turning away.

"...'lo," she murmured before running behind her dad. Dojima let out a short laugh.

"Haha, what are you so shy for?" he asked her teasingly. Nanako wasn't having any of that though and smacked her dad on the leg. "Ow!" He continued to laugh before turning back to look at me. "Let's get going. My car's over there."

Letting Nanako lead the way, they helped me pack my things in the truck and then we were off to the Dojima household.

~ Garden of Souls ~

The ride through town was just as quiet as Inaba itself. I had settled for watching the buildings pass us by out the window. Nanako sat up front with her dad while I sat at the back.

"...I heard about what happened to your friends," Dojima said with a serious tone. "It's a damn shame."

"Yeah... It is..." I didn't say much until we stopped at the petrol station. We got out of the car as the attendant ran up to it.

"Hi! Welcome to Moel!" he said. Dojima turned to look at Nanako.

"Can you go to the bathroom by yourself?" he asked. Nanako gave a short nod in response.

"Uh-huh."

Nanako walked in the direction of where I assumed was the bathroom before the attendant called out to her, making her stop in

her tracks.

"It's in the back, to the left. You know which way's left? The side you don't hold your chopsticks."

Don't know if that was supposed to be a joke. It it was, it's a pretty stupid one.

Nanako seemed to agree with my internal thoughts.

"I know... Geez..." she said, sounding a little annoyed before leaving. The attendant looked at my uncle.

"Are you taking a trip?" he asked. Dojima shook his head.

"No, we were just picking her up. She just moved here from the big city."

"The big city, huh?" he asked curiously.

"Fill up my car while you're at it. Regular's fine."

"Right away, sir!"

Dojima looked to his right towards the road.

"Good a time as any for a smoke..." He walked off to do just that, leaving me to watch while the attendant filled the car up with petrol.

"Are you in high school?" the attendant suddenly asked, grabbing my attention.

"...Yeah, I am," I answered carefully.

"Does it surprise you to see how little there is out here? There's not much to do, so you'll probably get bored pretty quickly. You'll either be hanging out with friends or doing part-time jobs."

"I don't have any friends," I responded curtly.

"Ah, of course. Sorry if I offended you. Speaking of part-time work, we're actually looking for part-time help right now."

"I think I'll pass," I told him, seeing what he was suggesting.

"Give it some thought, why don't you? We don't mind if you're a student," he said, stretching out his hand towards me.

"...Alright, I'll keep it in mind." I took a grip of his hand and shook it. Suddenly, he very quickly leaned in to whisper something in my ear. His words were confusing and didn't make sense to me.

"You can't save her," he told me, his voice taking on a completely different tone than before. It almost sounded threatening.

"...What?" I asked, slightly confused and worried. He backed off just as quickly when Nanako suddenly made her reappearance.

"Oh, I should get back to work!" He ran off. I walked over to Nanako, but when I stepped pass the tire I couldn't help but look in the direction he ran off in.

"Are you alright?" Nanako asked me. "You don't look so good."

"...I'm fine."

Now that she mentions it, I do feel kinda dizzy... What's wrong with me today?

Dojima walked back from his smoke and noticed that something was up.

"What's wrong? You okay?" he asked. I shook my head to try and get rid of the dizziness.

"I just feel a little light-headed," I told him.

"That's understandable. You must be exhausted from the trip," he said with an understanding tone. "I think he's done now. We should get going."

~ Garden of Souls ~

The car slowly came to a stop outside a quaint and modern house on the eastern edge of Inaba. I assumed that the house we stopped

at was the Dojima home and got out of the car. We got all my luggage- which wasn't much – out the trunk and moved them into the room I would be staying in.

The hours ticked away until it was time for dinner. A simple take-out dinner, which I didn't mind. Working in a fast-food joint for a certain amount of time had made me pretty indifferent about the stuff. We all had drinks as well. Dojima had a can of beer, Nanako had a juice carton and I had a soda.

"Let's have a toast." Dojima raised his can in the air. Nanako and I followed suit and then we took a drink before setting them down.

"So... Your mom is busy with something important, right? I know it's only for a year, but getting stuck in a place like this because of your parent... It's rough being a kid. Well, it's just me and Nanako here, so it'll be nice to have someone else around. So long as you're here, you're part of the family. So make yourself at home."

"I thank you for the hospitality," I said, bowing my head a little. Dojima chuckled dryly.

"Oh come on. There's no need to act so formal. Look, you're making Nanako all tense!" he pointed out, which served to make her tense up even more than before. "Anyway, let's eat."

We were about to dug in until we heard a soft ringing noise.

"Ugh... Who's calling at this hour?" He dug through his pockets and brought out his cell phone which he held up to his ear. "...Dojima speaking."

He stood up and walked to the kitchen table. The Dojima's home was quite small, consisting of a living room and kitchen that weren't separated, three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.

"Yeah? I see... So where is it?" He didn't look happy with the response he was given. "Alright, I'm on my way..." He hung up and looked down at the device before pocketing it. "Looks like I made the right choice to skip the booze." He turned back to look at me and Nanako. "Sorry, but I gotta take care of some business. Go ahead

and eat without me. I don't know how late I'll be. Nanako, you help her out, okay?"

"...Okay," Nanako responded sadly. Her voice made it clear that this was common occurrence. Dojima walked over to the front door and opened it. Immediately, the sound of pouring rain reached my ears.

"Nanako, it's raining out! What did you do to the laundry?!"

"I already brought it in!"

"...Alright. Well, I'm off." He closed the door behind him as he left, leaving me alone with my cousin. Nanako grabbed the TV remote and turned the TV on. The weather channel was the first thing to appear on the screen.

"—for this week. Next, let's take a look at the hourly breakdown of tomorrow's weather. With storm clouds moving from the west, expect rain throughout the day tomorrow in most areas."

Great... Can't stand rainy days.

"Let's eat," Nanako said, her voice having no emotion in it. While she ate most of her food, I did not.

...I might want to try and talk to her.

"...So, what does your dad do?" I asked.

"He... investigates stuff? Like crime scenes."

"Oh, so he's a detective?"

Nanako nodded her head.

"And now for the local news," I heard the newscaster say, which drew my attention to the TV. "City council secretary, Taro Namatame, is under fire for an alleged relationship with a female reporter."

The TV showed a picture of this Taro Namatame; a man with short black hair, brown eyes and a mole on his forehead wearing a suit.

The picture then changed to a woman who had brown hair tied in a bun, brown eyes, purple eyeshadow and wore a red kimono with a pink sash.

"His wife, enka ballad sensation Misuzu Hiiragi, revealed to this station that she will likely pursue damages. In response, Eye Television has decided to cancel all of announcer Mayumi Yamano's televised appearances."

Now the picture changed from the enka singer to Mayumi Yamano; a young woman with short black hair and brown eyes wearing a white collared shirt.

"Until allegations of an affair with Mr Namatame are resolved, she'll remain off the air and out of the public eye."

"...This is boring." Nanako changed the channel quickly after saying that. A commercial was playing.

"At Junes, everyday is Customer Appreciation Day. Come see for yourself, and get in touch with our products! *Every day's great at your Junes!*~" The commercial ended with a jingle which was sure to get stuck in my head if I listened to it a few more times. It was one of those jingles.

"'*Every day's great at your Junes!*~'" Nanako repeated, smiling and waving her arm as she did so. It was the first time I had actually seen her smile. That smile disappeared though when the commerical changed and she looked at me again. "Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, just as emotionless as before.

I scrambled to grab the chopsticks next to the plate and dug in.

~ Garden of Souls ~

It was already quite late when I went up to my room. Dojima hadn't returned and Nanako told me to get some rest. A bunch of boxes were stacked in front of the couch, but I couldn't be bothered unpacking them at that hour and decided to just go to bed. A futon was set up in the corner for me to use; it wasn't exactly the most comfortable thing in the world, but I could bear it.

As I closed my eyes, one thought swam through my head.

Stuck here for an entire year...

When I awoke, it wasn't in my new room. No, it was somewhere else entirely. I got up onto my feet and tried to look around me, but a thick fog surrounded me and prevented me from seeing any further in. I could barely make out a pathway leading forward and, seeing no other option, I followed it.

The path I walked seemed to go on forever, nothing suggesting that it had an end. I was proven wrong however when I saw something resembling a doorway. Curious, and seeing no other way forward, or out of there for that matter, I opened it.

I stumbled upon a huge room. I wasn't sure how huge it was because of the fog blocking my sight. I tried to look around the room and saw a figure obscured by fog. I couldn't make out what kind of creature it was, but it was a massive figure.

"So... You're the one," the figure said in a distinctly male voice. His voice was loud and booming, so loud I could feel the beginning of a headache forming. I held my head as the pounding became more and more pronounced.

"This world is weak. I can feel it in the trees, in the wind, the very earth itself. Humanity's desires are an extension of this weakness. You can see this weakness in the world and destroy it with your own hands. No matter how much you struggle, you won't be able to change your fate... And the darkness surrounding your heart will only grow more and more..."

That was all I heard before the throbbing in my head became too much for me to handle and I collapsed.

Next Time – Chapter II: "I don't have to be afraid..."

Chapter II

~ ***Chapter II: "I don't have to be afraid..."*** ~

That morning, I shot up from my bed rather violently, breathing in and out heavily. That dream... No. It was more like a nightmare, had plagued me the entire night. I heard voices. Many voices. I couldn't make out what was said or what the nightmare was even about, but something about it shook me to the core.

...I don't know why, but... It doesn't matter. I should get ready for school.

Though those thoughts ran through my mind, I couldn't help but place a hand over where my heart was. I shook my head and got dressed. Heading downstairs, I was bombarded with the smell of eggs, toast and bacon.

Dojima wasn't around; either he went to work early or he didn't come home at all. I wasn't sure which of those was worse. Maybe the case he was working on was a lot tougher than I thought? I went over to the kitchen table and sat down as Nanako placed a third plate down.

"Let's eat," she said. I couldn't help but notice that the food was freshly cooked. My uncle certainly didn't cook it. That much was obvious, since he was out. So the only one who could have was Nanako.

"Did you cook all this?" I asked, cutting into the bacon and placing it in my mouth. It was mouthwateringly delicious.

"I can make toast... And cook sunny-side up eggs in the morning," she replied. "Dad can't cook, so I buy dinner."

So she has to take care of herself...

"You're starting school today, right?" I nodded my head in response to her query. "My school's on the way, so let's go together," she said, giving me a small smile. Despite that, I could tell she was

somewhat restless.

We finished our breakfast and headed out. We walked together, not saying a word until we reached the riverbank. This town really was quite small. It didn't take too long to walk from place to place. When we reached the intersection, Nanako stopped and pointed to the east.

"You keep going straight from here," she told me before turning around. "My school's this way. Bye!" With a smile, she walked off, leaving me to my own devices. Knowing that I would be late if I wasted any more time, I walked in the direction Nanako told me to.

I reached the intersection near the school, I would say a couple minutes away from it. I saw a couple of students with umbrellas with them. It was quite a rainy day, now that I thought about it. I didn't normally pay attention to stuff like the weather unless it was forecasting sunny days. Though I did have the foresight to bring an umbrella that day.

"Whoooooa!" I heard someone yell. I looked back and saw a male student on his bike, trying to balance an umbrella in his hand and keep the bike stable on the slippery road. He wasn't doing all that great. I watched as he barrelled past me and ended up crashing straight into a telephone post.

Ouch. That looked painful. VERY painful. Looks like he hit his balls on something duringthe impact.

"Ngh... Urrrrghhh..." he let out painfully, clutching his groin with a pained expression on his face.

...There isn't a lot I can do for him. I should leave him be.

With an internal apology to the troubled male, I walked past him and continued on my way to the school.

~ Garden of Souls ~

Man, Yasogami High is a small place... I like it. Small is good. Don't think I could take being in a big school again. I just hope I can get through this year without any trouble.

I followed a hunched over male teacher through the halls. Probably in his late thirties if I had to guess, black hair in a bob cut, hazel eyes and buck teeth, which I found odd but I wasn't one to judge people on first appearances... Most of the time.

I walked into the classroom with him. The man hadn't said a word during the walk through the halls, but he didn't seem to like the fact that his class was animated with the chatter of the other students.

"Awright, shut your traps!" he yelled with an annoying tone. Yup, already hated him. "I'm Kinshiro Morooka, your homeroom teacher from today forward! First things first! Just 'cause it's spring doesn't mean you can swoon over each other like love-struck baboons. Long as I'm around, you students are going to be pure as the driven snow!"

The other students looked rather awkward listening to this.

You try standing up here with the guy.

"Now I hate wasting my time, so I better introduce this transfer student." He turned his head to look at me. "Write your name on the board!" he ordered. I did so while he continued to speak.

"This sad sack's been thrown from the big city out to the middle of nowhere like yesterday's garbage. And she's just as much of a loser here as she was there, so you guys better not get any ideas hitting on her!"

I had finished writing my name on the board when he said that. I had planned to keep civil during my time here, to be as polite as possible so I didn't draw attention to myself.

...Nuts to that, I say.

"...Who're you calling a loser, you buck-toothed moron?" I asked, clearly so the entire class could hear it. The other students gasped in shock, and Mr Morooka didn't look all that pleased with me.

"That's it, you're on my shit list, effective immediately!" he yelled while I had a small smirk of satisfaction on my face.

"Language," I said. "It isn't very nice for a teacher to swear at his students." That served to only agitate him even further.

"Now listen up! This town is miles away from your big city of perverts and assholes, in more ways than one. You better not even think of getting involved with the guys here, let alone leading them on!"

Yeah... Fat chance of that happening.

"But what do I know? It's not like the old days. Even here, kids grow up so damn fast. Every time I turn my back, you're fooling around on your damn phones, checking your LifeJournals and your MyPlaces..."

Mr Morooka just kept going on and on and on and for the love of all that was holy, make it stop! Luckily, someone raised their hand. A female student, who actually stood out amongst the other students due to her green jacket with several buttons. She had brown bowl-shaped hair and brown eyes.

"Excuse me!" she called out through Morooka's inane ramblings. "Is it okay if the transfer student sits here?" she asked, pointing out the empty seat next to her. Morooka looked at her, a little confused but mostly annoyed.

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Ya hear that? Your seat's over there," he told me. "So hurry up and siddown already!"

Good. Anything to get away from this.

I walked over to my seat and sat down next to the girl, my saviour. As soon as I had sat down, she leaned over slightly so she could whisper to me.

"He's the worst, huh? Rotten luck for you to get stuck in Morooka's class... Well, we just have to endure for the year."

She straightened up and kept her eyes forward, towards the front of the room. I could hear the other students speaking all around me.

"Sucks to be the transfer student, ending up in King Moron's class on the first morning here..."

"Yeah, he won't think twice about suspending you if you get on his bad side. Then again, we're all in the same boat..."

"Shut your traps!" King Moron shouted. I liked that nickname: King Moron. I had decided to call him Mr Moron from that moment on. "I'm taking roll, and I damn well expect you to respond in an orderly manner!"

~ Garden of Souls ~

"That's all for today. Normal lectures will start tomorrow."

Thank God, I thought it would never end!

Some students got out of their seats as Moron walked towards the door. The beginnings of the students chatter was interrupted by the sound of the school's PA going on.

"Attention, all teachers," the female voice boomed through the room. "Please report immediately to the Faculty Office for a brief meeting. All students must return to their classrooms and are not to leave until further notice."

Mr Moron turned to look at us.

"Hrnh. You heard the announcement. Don't go anywhere unless you hear otherwise." He left the room, leaving us with those parting words. The sounds of police sirens could be heard from outside, and some of my fellow classmates ran to the windows.

"Did something happen? Don't those sirens sound really close?"

"Ugh, I can't see a damn thing. Firckin' fog..."

"Yeah, like every time it rains lately, it gets all foggy."

"Hey, did you hear? I hear the paparazzi's looking all over for that announcer."

"Oh yeah, you mean Mayumi Yamano, right?"

"I hear some guys spotted her at the shopping district."

"Actually, I heard that..." The male student leaned in and whispered the next part into the other guy's ear. So quietly that I couldn't hear what was said, even with my abnormally good hearing. The other student sounded surprised though.

"Are you serious?!" The student walked around the tables until he reached the one diagonally across from my desk. "H-Hey, Yukiko-san. Mind if I ask you something? Is it true that announcer's staying at your family's inn?" he asked the black-haired woman sitting at her desk.

"I can't discuss such things," she responded with an even tone.

"Y-Yeah, I guess not..." The student ran off after getting brushed off. My saviour walked up to the black-haired woman and sighed.

"Sheesh, how much longer is this going to take?" she asked the woman who shrugged her shoulders.

"There's no telling," she replied. The saviour girl looked down at the floor dejected.

"I shouda left before that announcement came on..." She perked back up pretty quickly though. "By the way, didja try what I told you the other day?" The black-haired girl probably looked confused. I knew that I was; I had no clue what they were talking about. "You know... The thing about rainy nights..."

"Oh... No, not yet. Sorry," the black-haired girl apologised.

"Ahhh, it's okay. It's just, I heard a guy in the class next door yell something like '*My soul mate is Yamano, the announcer!*"

Whatever this is about, it must be really stupid...

The school PA chimed again, and the class fell silent as we listened to what it had to say.

"Attention, all students. There has been an incident inside the school district. Police officers have been dispatched around the School Zone. Please stay calm and contact your parents or guardians as soon as possible, and quickly leave the school grounds. Do not

disturb the police officers. Head directly home."

The announcement sent the classroom ablaze with discussion.

"Incident?!"

"What, something actually happened?"

"C"mon, let's go take a look!"

I had packed all my stuff away by this point and was just waiting for the all-clear to go home. Now that I had that, I stood up.

"Hey, are you going home by yourself? Why don't you come with us?" my saviour in the green jacket asked, smiling before she smacked herself on the head a little. "Oh, nearly forgot! I'm Chie Satonaka. You know I sit next to you right?"

I nodded my head.

"Thanks for saving me from Mr Moron," I told her, which made her laugh a little.

"Well, it's nice to meet you." She looked to the black-haired girl on her left; she wore the standard Yasogami High uniform along with a red sweater. She had long eyelashes, black eyes and had long straight black hair which she keeps neat with a red headband. Methinks she likes the colour red. "This is Yukiko Amagi."

"Oh, nice to meet you..." Yukiko said politely. "I'm sorry that this is so sudden..."

"C'mon, don't apologise like that!" Chie said, sounding a little worried. "It makes me look like I got no upbringing. I just wanted to ask some stuff, that's all."

I giggled a little.

"It's quite alright," I said. "If it's on the way, I'll walk with you."

"Cool!" Chie said cheerfully. We started to make our way out, but a certain male student stood in our path.

Wasn't he the guy who busted his nuts on the telephone pole?

The male student had slightly messy fawn-coloured hair and brown eyes. He wore the standard uniform like everyone else but he had headphones hanging around his neck. Right now, the guy was looking pretty nervous about something.

"Uh, umm, Miss Satonaka...?" he asked, a hint of fear in his tone. He reached into his bag and pulled out a case. Looked like a DVD. "This was really awesome. Like the way they moved was just amazing to see..." He suddenly bowed and held out the DVD to Chie like he was presenting a gift to an Empress.

"And... I'm really sorry! It was an accident! Please just have mercy until my next paycheck!"

Chie snatched the DVD from the guy's hands quickly.

"See ya! Thanks!" The guy tried to walk quickly to the door, to escape the hurricane, but Chie was right on his heels.

"Stop right there! What did you do to my DVD?!"

What happened next was not safe for minors to witness. Chie had caught up to him and gave him a swift, hard kick right to his man parts.

"Argh!" he cried out in pain. Yukiko and I walked over to Chie as she opened the DVD case to inspect the damage. Chie didn't like what she saw.

"What the?! I can't believe this! It's completely cracked..." She looked on the verge of tears upon seeing that her prized DVD had a crack right down the middle, making it pretty much worthless. "Waaaahhhh! My '*Trial of the Dragon*'!"

"I think mine's cracked too..." the guy said, clutching his groin with a pained expression, again. "C-Critical hit to the nads..."

"A-Are you alright?" Yukiko asked the poor guy, who looked up at her, trying to smile despite the pain he was probably in.

"Oh, Yukiko-san... Are you worried about me?"

"He's fine, Yukiko!" Chie said, sounding really annoyed. "Let's just ditch him and go home."

Chie and Yukiko left the classroom. I couldn't help but give him one last look of pity.

...There's not a lot I can do for him. I should leave him be...

~ Garden of Souls ~

Chie, Yukiko and I walked out of the school building. The rain had stopped and the fog had cleared up a little, but the atmosphere was still dreary. We had made it to the gate when we were stopped by someone. A male who looked rather... fish-like, if I had to describe him. His black eyes and messy hair. I don't know, he just reminded me of a fish.

He didn't go to Yasogami High; the uniform he wore made that clear. Which begged the question of why he was there.

"You're Yuki, right?" he addressed Yukiko very creepily. I shuddered unintentionally from hearing that name, but thankfully no one noticed. "Y-You want to go hang out somewhere?"

Yukiko looked perplexed about the student standing in front of her.

"What? Wh-Who are you?"

"What's up with him? What school he's from?" I heard a male student ask from behind us.

"Never mind that. He's going for Yukiko-san?" the person behind him pointed out. "Man, you'd think he'd wait until she's alone to make his move..."

"I bet you a can of TaP he gets knocked out."

"No bet. Haven't you heard how difficult the Amagi Challenge is?"

The two males chatted excitedly while our attentions were focused

on the strange student.

"Um, s-so... are you coming or not?" the student asked forcefully, which made Yukiko feel uncomfortable.

"I-I'm not going..." Yukiko said, rejecting him.

"...Fine!" he shouted, running off down the small slope. Yukiko turned to look at us.

"Wh-What did he want from me?" Yukiko asked us, confusion evident in her expression. Chie and I looked at her incredulously.

"What did he want...? Obviously, he was asking you out on a date," Chie pointed out to her, which only seemed to make her more confused.

"Huh? Really...?"

"You really had no clue? Sheesh..." Chie sighed. "But then again, that was *way* over the top. It was creepy how he called you Yuki all of a sudden."

The sound of a squeaky bike reached our ears and I saw the '*Trial of the Dragon Destroyer*' walk around the corner with his bike.

"Yo, Yukiko-san," he greeted her, sounding much better. "Turned down another lovelorn fool, huh? Man, you're cruel. You got me the same way last year."

Yukiko had a nasty habit of being confused about stuff. I'd seen that expression at least three times now.

"I don't recall doing that."

"Whoa, you serious?" he asked, an excited and hopeful glint in his eyes. "So then, you wanna hang out sometime?!"

"...I'd rather not."

Ouch, shot down almost immediately.

"That'll teach me to get my hopes up..." he sighed, getting on his bike. "Anyway, you two better not pick on the transfer student too much." He rode off just as Chie stomped the ground with her foot in irritation.

"We're just curious, is all!" Chie shouted after him. I saw from the corner of my eye that Yukiko had turned her head to look at me.

"U-Um, I'm sorry for dragging you into this..."

"Does this sort of thing happen all the time?" I asked curiously.

"Not that I can remember..." Yukiko looked as though she was trying to recall any of those times.

Chie looked around us and saw that a group of students had gathered. Probably wondering what all the commotion was.

"C'mon, let's go, people are staring."

Chie had walked off quickly, leaving Yukiko and I struggling to keep up with her.

~ Garden of Souls ~

We had walked through the mostly empty streets of the school district, making light conversation along the way.

"Ah... So you came here because of your mother's job. Haha, I thought it was something more serious," Chie had told me after I finished explaining why I transferred to Inaba to begin with. Chie looked out at the farm and the hills near us.

"There really is nothing here, huh? That's what makes it nice but there isn't much we can show to people from outside. Though, there is something from Mount Yasogami..." Chie placed her hand on her chin as she thought about this. "I think our dyed clothes or pottery or something is kinda famous."

"I can see what you mean about there not being much to show," I said, nodding my head. "Inaba is a small place after all."

"Oh wait, there's the Amagi Inn! Yukiko's family runs it. It's the pride of Inaba!" Chie proclaimed proudly. Yukiko was very modest. This conversation was a clear indication of that to me.

"Huh? It's... just an old inn," she told us. Chie seemed determined to argue this point however.

"No way, it's been in all sortsa magazines as a hidden treasure. It's a great inn! It's been going for generations, and Yukiko here is going to take over someday. Their inn actually attracts a lot of visitors to Inaba. It pretty much keeps this town going."

"...I don't think that's entirely true," Yukiko said softly.

"So, tell me. You think Yukiko's cute, huh?" Chie suddenly asked me. I had to go over what she said in my mind to make sure I heard her right.

"What's this all of a sudden...?" I looked over at Yukiko.

Well... She is pretty. That much is undeniable.

"Yeah, I think so," I told Chie, who had a victorious smile on her face.

"I knew it!" she cheered. Yukiko didn't exactly look happy with the way the conversation was going.

"Come on... Don't start this again..."

"She's really popular at school, but she's never had a boyfriend. Kinda weird, huh?" Yukiko's face glowed bright red thanks to Chie's words.

"C-Come on, stop it!" she said to Chie. "Y-You shouldn't believe that, okay?" she told me. "It's not true that I'm popular or that I've never had a boyfriend!"

Denying that a little too quickly, don't you think?

"Wait, n-no! What I mean to say was that I-I don't need a boyfriend!" She turned her head away from me. "Geez... Chie!"

Chie was having a good time teasing Yukiko, judging from her laughter.

"Hahahaha! Sorry, I'm sorry. But this is our chance to talk to someone from the big city, and you barely said a word!" Chie's eyes widened a little as she looked further down the street. "Hey, what's that?"

She pointed out the small crowd gathered near the intersection. We went over to investigate and saw that they were gathered near a police barricade.

"So that high schooler left school early, and as she came down this street..."

The two women there was having a conversation. I couldn't help but listen in, curious about what happened myself.

"Wow. Who could imagine *that* hanging from an antenna?"

"I wanted to see it too."

"You got here too late. The police and the fire department took it down just a moment ago."

"Well, I think it's terrifying. I can't believe a dead body showed up around here..."

What?! A dead body?!

"Wait... What did she just say? A dead body?!" Chie asked aloud; we were all shocked to hear the news, but Chie and Yukiko even more so. I guess being in a quite town such as this didn't exactly lend itself to stuff like that. I certainly wasn't expecting it. My first impressions of the town was that it would be a nice, quiet place to spend the year. How quickly did that change.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my uncle walking around. Of course he would have been investigating this. He caught sight of us and walked over.

"Hey, what're you doing here?" he asked, looking calm.

"We were on our way home," I explained to him. "We were just passing by."

"Huh... I should have figured that'd happen," he said to himself. "That damn principal. We told him not to let them through here..."

"You know this guy, Yuka...?" Chie asked, looking at me. I nodded my head.

"Yeah, this is my uncle," I told them.

"I'm Detective Dojima, her guardian. Uhh... Well, how should I say this...? I hope you get along with her," he told Chie and Yukiko, looking rather awkward. He must still have been in '*work mode*'. "But you three should really stop wandering around and head straight home."

He started to walk back to the crime scene but a young male went running past us; clasping a hand over his mouth. I didn't get a good look at him but he squatted down near a bush and started to throw up.

Okay, ewww...

"Adachi! How long are you going to act like a rookie? You want to get sent back to the central office?!" Dojima yelled at the suited man. I guessed that this Adachi works for him.

"I-I'm sorry... Nngh..." He puked again after sputtering out an apology. Dojima sighed.

"Go wash your face. We're going to go around and gather information."

Dojima walked back to one of the other officers that was there, Adachi following close behind.

"Was this what that announcement was about...?" Chie asked worriedly.

"Most likely," I responded, wrapping a bit of my hair around my finger.

"What do they mean... it was hanging from the antenna...?" Yukiko asked, mostly to herself. The idea of a body hanging from an antenna wouldn't sit right with most folk. Chie and Yukiko both looked unnerved.

"Hey, Yukiko...? Why don't we go to Junes some other time?"

"Good idea."

"Alright then, we're taking off," Chie said to me. "Starting tomorrow, neighbour, let's do our best."

"Alright, see you tomorrow then," I responded as they walked off. With nothing important to do outside, I went back to the Dojima's house.

~ Garden of Souls ~

It was evening, and Dojima had still not returned. Nanako and I were sat at the living room table, watching the news. Nanako didn't seem all that interested on what was on the television and was more worried about her dad it would seem.

"I wonder if Dad's not coming home again tonight..."

I glanced at Nanako. She looked saddened at her father's absence. I wasn't sure if I could say anything to cheer her up, so I kept silent.

"Our top story this evening concerns a bizarre case in a quiet suburb," the newscaster's voice crackled from the TV's speakers. They were going to talk about what happened. I mean, a murder would obviously make the news. Especially one that is well known like this one was. "Around noon today, a woman was found dead near the Samegawa River in Inaba." They showed a picture of the school zone as he spoke. The picture then changed to a picture of a woman I didn't expect to see. "The deceased has been identified as Ms Mayumi Yamano, a twenty-seven year old announcer at the local television station. The initial results of the Inaba Police Department's investigation have revealed—"

"Ah! The Inaba Police Department! Th-That's where Dad works!" Nanako yelled over the newscaster, her eyes widened and spoke

wonders of the fear she felt. I just had to say something at this point.

"It'll be alright," I told her calmly. She seemed to calm down as I told her this.

"...I know. It's his job, so this stuff happens."

"The body was found hanging from a large television antenna atop a local resident's roof," the newscaster continued on with his report. "Authorities are uncertain as to why the body was in such a state. With the cause of death also uncertain, police continue to investigate whether the death was an accident or a homicide. A thick fog common to the area has slowed their progress, and plans to fully canvas the area have been delayed until tomorrow..."

So the TV announcer's been found dead. Wasn't she the one involved with that scandal with the council secretary?

"They found her on the roof? That's scary..." Nanako said, taking a drink out of her juice carton. Her face brightened up when a familiar jingle made itself known. "Oh! It's Junes!"

"At Junes, every day is Customer Appreciation Day. Come see for yourself, and get in touch with our products! *Every day's great at your Junes!~*"

"'*Every day's great at your Junes!~*'" Nanako sang along with the commercial. She looked at me with a cheerful smile on her face. I think she expected me to sing along as well.

...Eh, why not?

"'*Every day's great at your Junes!~*'" I parroted, smiling and imitating Nanako's little hand movement, much to her joy.

"You memorised it already? I'm the best in my class!" she told me, continuing to sing the jingle under her breath. I couldn't help but leave my smile on my face. She had completely forgotten all about the news story.

The commercial changed again; this time a commercial for an energy drink. The idol in the commercial was one most would

recognise: Rise Kujikawa. A beautiful girl who, wearing the latest in fashion and with her music, has caught the hearts and minds of many a male – and some females – out there. She was wearing a bikini and standing under a torrent of water, kinda like a waterfall. The scene changed to Rise drinking out of a can.

"I'm tired of diets, and enough of going to the gym! Good thing there's something even I can handle!"

She tilts her head in a fashion that made her look rather cute as a picture of a can faded in with a nifty water-like effect.

"Slim down this summer with the refreshing taste of Calorie Magic," a male voice said, closing off the commercial. Nanako stood up and went to the kitchen.

"Is ramen okay for tonight?" she asked.

"...Yeah."

After having dinner, I went back to my room. Many boxes were still left unpacked, but I was feeling too tired from the day's events. So I all but collapsed onto the futon. As I slowly drifted to sleep, my thoughts turned to what happened earlier that day. How the dead body ended up on the antenna like that. I couldn't help but feel slightly worried about it. However, I knew that the best thing to do would be to just leave it to the police.

"I don't have to be afraid... Not of this."

Next Time – Chapter III: "You ever hear of the Midnight Channel?"

Chapter III

~ ***Chapter III: "You ever hear of the Midnight Channel?"*** ~

My night's sleep wasn't plagued by dreams that time and the morning at the Dojima's residence wasn't very eventful. My uncle hadn't returned and Nanako made breakfast again – it was still very delicious. I walked down the street towards Yasogami High. I would like to say that was all that had happened, but things in my life were never that simple. Though I certainly wished it were so at times.

As I walked down toward the intersection, a peculiar thing happened. Someone came speeding down the street on their bike, they went so quickly I didn't even see that person's face. What I did have the pleasure of seeing was that person crashing and ending up landing face first into the trash can.

I winced at the sound of the impact and walked towards him. I stood there and watched as that poor person rolled about; unable to break free of his very stinky prison.

"S-Someone... Help..." I recognised that voice that, if my memory held true, belonged to the man that I knew as the '*Trial of the Dragon Destroyer*'

...This is just sad. I have to help him out.

Trying not to get dirty myself, I helped the guy out of his trash can prison. He picked up his bike.

"Whew, you saved me. Thanks!" the '*Trial of the Dragon Destroyer*' said gratefully. I pointed out the yoghurt cup that still rested in his hair. He quickly grabbed it and threw it back into the trash where it belonged. "Umm... Oh yeah, that's right. You're that transfer student, Yuka Narukami. I'm Yosuke Hanamura. Nice to meet ya," he introduced himself.

"Likewise," I responded with a small smile. He lightly chuckled.

He seems to be okay. That's good.

"Say, did you hear about that incident from yesterday? They found that announcer lady hanging from an antenna!" Yosuke said, checking the handlebars of his bike to see if they were okay. "You think it was some kinda warning? There's no way something that weird could've been an accident."

That's very insightful. I had peg him as an idiot, but he's more clever than I give him credit for.

"I think you're right," I said, nodding my head. "Something that bizarre had to be the work of someone."

Or some THING...

"Dangling a dead body over a roof like that... That's just messed up." Yosuke shook his head. "Then again, it's pretty messed up to kill someone in the first place." He glanced down at the watch on his wrist and his eyes widened. "Oh crap! We're late!" He spun his bike around so it was facing towards the school and looked back at me. "You wanna ride? It's a little squeaky, but it should be fine."

Uh...

~ Garden of Souls ~

The school day passed by in a flash. Mr Moron was still annoying, so I was glad the day flew by as quickly as it did. I packed up my books and my assignments.

"So, you getting used to this place?" I heard Yosuke ask me. I turned my head to look at him and responded surely.

"More or less," I said, closing my bag up.

"Wow, that was fast," Yosuke said, sounding slightly impressed. "There isn't much to do compared to the big city, but there is that certain... something you can't get anywhere else. The air's clean. The food's great... Oh, you know about the local delicacy?" he asked with an amused smirk. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Should I?"

"It's grilled steak! Like that's anything special, huh? I know a place where you can get it cheap. Wanna come? You helped me out this morning, so it's on me."

I was about to respond but Chie, almost as if drawn to the mention of food, walked up to us.

"What about me, huh? No apologies? My '*Trial of the Dragon*'," she drew out the last word, making her irritation known to all who hear her. Yosuke looked equally as irritated.

"Urgh... You always come around when I talk about food."

"How about it, Yukiko? Don't you think he should treat us too?" she asked Yukiko, who was in the middle of standing up. She grabbed her bag and let it dangle from her hands.

"I'll pass," Yukiko replied. "I don't want to gain any more weight. I need to help out at the inn today anyway."

"Wow, Yukiko-san! You started training to take over the business?" Yosuke asked curiously.

"It's not like that! I'm just helping out when it gets busy." Her eyes gave away how tough the work could get. It didn't seem as though Chie and Yosuke noticed that. "Well, I should be on my way."

I did see Chie was looking at Yukiko's back with a worried look though. She might have had some idea about what was going on after all, but it wasn't any of my business.

"Oh well. We should get going as well," Chie told Yosuke, who was taken aback.

"Huh? Do I seriously have to treat two people?" he asked, knowing full well what the answer was, if his tone was any indication.

~ Garden of Souls ~

Yosuke led Chie and I deep into the inner parts of the town and we

ended up at this huge supermarket. It was the same one in the commercial that Nanako was quite fond of singing the jingle to: Junes. Yosuke carried a tray with our orders to the table we were sitting at.

"*This* is the cheap place you were talking about? They don't have grilled steak here," Chie complained as Yosuke sat down.

"Yeah, well, once you hopped on the freeloader train, I had to change my plans," Yosuke replied, rather sarcastic in his tone.

"Still, that's no reason to take up to your place."

Wait, HIS place?

"Dude, this isn't my place or anything," Yosuke denied vehemently. He turned his head to look at me, looking as though he just remembered something. "Oh, right. I haven't told you yet, huh? I moved here from another city six months back. This location just opened up, and my dad was assigned to manage it. So our entire family came out here."

He leaned forward and grabbed his drink from the tray.

"Here, this is to welcome you to town."

I grabbed my drink from the tray also.

"Satonaka, yours is on me too," he told Chie, who was in the process of grabbing her own drink.

"Yeah, I know," she told him as she raised the cup towards the sky. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

With a yell in unison, we all took a drink out of our respective cups and set them down in front of us. The conversation was animated with small talk. Mostly Chie and Yosuke arguing or them asking me how my day was.

"It's only been half a year since this place opened up, but I haven't

been to the local shopping district much since. A lot of stores there started closing and... Oh, uh..." Chie realised who was sitting right next to her. Yosuke had a slightly disappointed look on his face.

"You can't blame it all on Junes, can you?"

Something tells me there's a story behind this.

I saw Yosuke look off to his left, and his face brightened up.

"Hey... It's Saki-senpai!" Yosuke stood up. "Sorry, be right back."

"Is that Yosuke's girlfriend?" I asked curiously, to which Chie laugh a little.

"Haha, he wishes," Chie told me as Yosuke walked off to meet his not-girlfriend. "That's Saki Konishi. Her family runs a liquor store in the shopping district. I think she's working here part time though..."

Hmm... I wonder why that is? Must need the extra money or something. Not that I have any right to judge someone on that.

Despite the distance between us and them, I was able to hear what the two of them were talking about.

"Hey, how's it going? You look beat."

"Heeey! I'm finally on break..." Saki said with a high pitched voice. She had long wavy light brown hair, grey eyes and sported a tan. "What's up, Hana-chan? Boosting the family business by bringing your friends here?"

"Madam, you wound me!" Yosuke said, feigning pain with an amused and light-hearted smile, which changed to a worried frown. "Kidding aside... You look down. Did something happen?"

"...It's nothing. I'm just a little tired."

"Hey, if you need to talk, I'm always willing to listen. I..."

Saki chuckled with a hand raised to her mouth.

"I'm fine. Thanks, though." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Why did I leave school early yesterday...?" She looked over in our direction. "Hey, isn't that the girl who transferred here?"

She got off her seat and walked over to me. She seemed cheerful enough, though she definitely did look tired.

"Are you the transfer student?" she asked me. "Oh, did you hear about me already?" she also asked without waiting fro a response. "It must be nice to have someone else from the big city to talk to, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I responded, nodding my head.

"I don't see Hana-chan hanging out with the other students much," she told me, which made Yosuke panic a little.

"Uh – Not necessarily..."

"He doesn't have too many friends, so I hope you two get along good. Hana-chan's a good guy, but he can get nosy sometimes. You gotta tell him right to his face when he starts to annoy you."

"That's not true at all," I told her. "He's an okay guy."

"Haha, I'm just joking." Saki laughed a little and Yosuke laughed along with her.

"Hahaha... You had me going there, Senpai," he said with a slight chuckle at the end.

"Well, my break's just about over. Back to work I go..." She walked off towards the store and waved at us. "Laters!"

"Oh, uh, Senpai...!" Yosuke called out to her, but trailed off as she disappeared from our sight. He sat back down on his chair, folding his arms. "Haha, Saki-senpai says *I'm* annoying, but she's even nosier than me. She has a younger brother and pretty much treats me the same way..."

The way he spoke told me that he wasn't exactly happy about that. Something that Chie caught on to.

"Ohhh, so you don't want her to treat you like a brother, huh? Haha, I get it... So that's how it is..." Chie said teasingly before raising her hands in an opera-like pose. "The daughter of a local family-run liquor store and the scion of the invading chain... Hoho, the flame of forbidden love!" she said dramatically which, I had to admit, managed to get a chuckle out of me, especially from seeing Yosuke's blushing face.

"What—?! Dude, it's not like that!" he lied. He lied right to our faces.

"Oh reaaaaally..." Chie said, still in teasing mode. "Well, I know just the thing to cheer up that lovesick heart. You ever hear of the Midnight Channel?"

"The Midnight... Channel?" I asked confusedly, wondering if it was a local legend or something of the sort.

"You're supposed to look into a TV that's switched off, alone, exactly at midnight on a rainy night," Chie explained. "While you're staring at your own image, another person will appear on the screen... And they say that person's your soulmate."

Yosuke scoffed.

"What? For a second, I thought you were going to say something useful. How can you get excited over a childish urban legend like that?" he asked Chie, not believing what she said at all. Chie looked annoyed, as she usually did when speaking to Yosuke.

"Childish, huh? You don't believe it, do you?!"

"Of course I don't!"

"Well, it's raining tonight! Let's all try it out – then you'll see!"

"Try it out...? Wait, you haven't tried it out yourself?! Wow, I'm trying to remember the last time I heard something this stupid..."

Yosuke's look of disbelief turned neutral as he turned his head to look at me.

"All that aside, you know the incident yesterday? You guys think it

was murder?" he asked us.

"I don't know what else it could be," I said, taking another drink out of my cup.

"Ooh, what if the culprit behind it is still lurking around? Heehee..." he spoke with a creepy tone, which managed to unnerve Chie a little; if only because of the idea he presented.

"Sheesh, you shouldn't joke about that. Now who's the childish one?"

"I have to agree, it is in poor taste," I told him, keeping my tone neutral.

"All I'm saying is, you guys better try it out tonight," Chie all but ordered us.

How do I keep getting involved in stuff like this...? Oh well, it's worth a try, at least.

~ Garden of Souls ~

Another lonely night at the Dojima residence. Nanako and I sat at the living room table, eating some of the pre-made dinners that Nanako had bought.

"Did you father call?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"No... He always says he will..." she answered, dejected. As soon as she said this, we heard the front door slid open and close. Nanako's face lit up with joy and she jumped to her feet.

"Oh! He's home!"

I turned my head to see Dojima walk in, exhaustion and fatigue evident on his features.

"What a day..." he mumbled to himself as she sat on the couch. "Did anything happen while I was out?"

"Not really," I replied, still eating my dinner.

"You're late again..." Nanako added, sounding disappointed.

"I'm sorry..." Dojima said. "Been busy with work. Can you put on the news for me?"

Nanako didn't reply. Instead, she sat back down and pushed a button on the TV remote.

"Next, more details in the developing story on the incident in foggy Inaba. Announcer Mayumi Yamano's dead body was found hanging above a house in this isolated rural town. It is confirmed that Ms Yamano had been involved in an affair with Taro Namatame, husband of enka singer, Misuzu Hiiragi."

It was just a follow-up report about the incident yesterday. Nothing really special or noteworthy about it. Though I had to wonder if the incident could be tied with their lovers quarrel. It certainly was possible. Then again, I was no detective, so I couldn't really do much in the way of deducing stuff.

"The police plan to investigate this relationship and question any personnel involved with them. In addition, we now bring you an exclusive interview with the local student who found Ms Yamano's body."

Whoa! They actually found the person who saw it?

Dojima sighed when he heard this.

"An interview with the kid...? Where the hell did they find her?"

The video changed to show a female student standing near the school intersection. Her face was obscured though, probably for the sake of privacy.

"What went through your mind when you saw it? Could you tell she was dead? Did you see her face?" the reporter asked these questions in quick succession, and rather enthusiastically to boot.

"U-Umm..." the female student said, clearly flustered. They had also modified her voice as well. Even still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had seen her before.

"Don't you think it's scary that someone was killed on a foggy day?" the reporter asked next, which made the student stand upright.

"Huh... She was killed?"

"Oh, err... Did you see anyone suspicious around here?"

"No, not really..."

"We heard you found it when you left school early. Did you have some personal business to take care of?"

"Huh? That's..."

Looking at the girl a little more closely, she reminded me of Saki Konishi, Yosuke's Senpai. Though I didn't know her well enough to make an accurate judgement on that.

"—a tragedy that occurred near the local shopping district," the newscaster interrupted the interview, as if knowing it wouldn't get anywhere. "Most storeowners are raising concerns about losing customers as a result—"

"Hmph. If they lose more customers, it'll be because you're making such a stink about it..." I couldn't help but agree with my uncle. Apparently, the phrase '*Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*' didn't come to mind to these people. The scene changed to a commentator and the newscaster who were discussing candidly the case at hand.

"It really is a bizarre case, isn't it? I mean, hanging someone upside down from an antenna..." the commentator said. "I'd have to say it's a warning or a sign from the culprit."

"Yes, but so far, no one has come forward to take credit for the crime," the newscaster responded, nodding his head in agreement.

"Loads of prank calls though..." Dojima added, scratching the back of his head.

"So the cause of death is still unknown? And they don't have a single suspect yet?" the commentator asked, sounding really smug. "Taxpayer's funds are going to a police force who can't even figure

out if this is an accident or a homicide?"

If you think it's that easy, why don't you figure it out?

"We'll be right back after these messages," the newscaster announced and the news show went to the commercials. The first one we saw was a familiar one.

"At Junes, every day is Customer Appreciation Day. Come see for yourself, and get in touch with our products! *Every day's great at your Junes!~*"

"'*Every day's great at your Junes!~*'" Nanako sang once again. "Hey Dad, can we go to Junes together sometime?"

Dojima didn't answer.

"...No?" When we turned to look at him, we saw that he had fallen asleep. The investigation must have been more tiring than we realised. Nanako sighed.

"Geez..." She got up and started clearing the table. "I'll make sure he gets to bed. You just go and get some rest."

"...Alright." I didn't feel good about leaving Nanako to tend to the chores, but if she wanted me to go, I'll go.

Besides, I can't help but be curious about this Midnight Channel thing. Is it really just an urban legend? I guess I'll find out tonight...

~ Garden of Souls ~

It was almost midnight. I watched as the hands of the clock ticked away, drawing ever closer to that fated time.

Now, what did Chie say? To look at a turned off TV at midnight?

I could hear rain pouring down outside, just like Chie said. Making sure the TV was off, I watched and waited. Seconds turned to minutes as the clock slowly moved towards midnight. When the two hands were aligned, I looked at the blackened TV. I observed it for about fifteen more seconds before turning away.

Well, guess that's that.

I was going to go to sleep, but suddenly, the TV turned itself on. Shock flashed across my face as I turned back to look at it. It wasn't much really, all just a bunch of static; though the image did become clear several times, only for a second however. I thought I could see a woman, in some sort of store. It went by too quickly for me to register.

What I was really interested in, however, was the faint energy I could sense coming from the TV.

Why can I sense that?

Wondering if it really was coming from the TV itself, I walked over and stretched out a hand towards it. Using my pointed finger, I touched the TV screen. Like dipping into a pool of water, ripples formed on the screen and disappeared when I hastily pulled my hand back. My eyes widened and I stared at the screen with surprise.

Wh-What is that?

Curiosity overtaking me, I reached out and touched the screen again – this time putting my hand fully inside the TV. I closed my eyes and tried to sense if there was anything beyond the screen itself. After a few seconds, I could sense a familiar – and deadly – energy rushing towards me and I pulled my hand back before it got too close.

The ripples disappeared and, for a second, the fear that whatever that was would rush out of the TV at any moment coursed me. When I felt it was safe, I relaxed my posture and sat on the couch.

Just what is going on here...?

You would thin that I would be freaking out a little more, considering that what had happened was a little weird. But nope, not me. I had been through quite a few battles myself, and I come from a world that is very different to the world that most humans know, so it would take a lot more than that to faze me.

I have a... unique ability. Though that book of mine has had its

power deteriorate over the past few years from the disuse, I still had a couple of tricks up my sleeve in case I needed to defend myself. Even though I didn't want to think about it.

Still my thoughts drifted to it, and I remembered something that my mother told me a long time ago.

"*Yuka, listen to me. I didn't want you to get involved with this. I never thought that this day would come. I tried so hard to avoid it... I guess there's no helping it. You have a special power, to see the threads in the fabric of our world... and destroy it. Shaping reality as you see fit.*"

"*This power comes at a price. A terrible price. But that's just the reality of our world. I wasn't meant to receive this power, but you... You've been placed with an extraordinary burden on your shoulders.*"

"*Someone... Some THING wants nothing more than to see you suffer, just like they tried to do to me... He'll be coming after you... I can only hope that you'll be ready...*"

Next Time – Chapter IV: The Power to Cut Life

Chapter IV

~ ***Chapter IV: The Power to Cut Life*** ~

It wasn't easy getting to sleep that night, that was for sure. I constantly found myself waking up in the middle of the night, thinking I had heard something but it was just the wind brushing by the window. I eventually got to sleep properly and woke up the following morning more than a little cautious. I got dressed silently.

When I reached the door, I found myself looking back at my personal bag, of which I had dumped on the couch. I let out a sigh and walked over to it, unzipping it to take a look at what was inside. That book.

That book that had been a constant companion in some of my earlier battles, now gathering dust where no one else could see. To be honest, I wasn't sure why I brought it along with me. Perhaps you could call it nostalgia, or an uneasy feeling. Whatever it was, I felt that I had to bring it along with me.

...Damn book...

Letting out a sigh, I zipped the bag back up and went to school with it.

~ Garden of Souls ~

"What, are you serious? Sticking your hand into the TV?" Yosuke asked with a chuckle while he ate out of a packed lunch he had with him. I had given him a glare in response.

"Be serious for five seconds! I'm really worried about this!"

"You must've fallen asleep in front of the TV or something. Still, you actually managed to see something?"

"It was mostly static. I saw something resembling a person, though I can't be sure who it actually was."

"Who would have thought there was actually some truth to that rumour. I managed to see something like that as well." Yosuke looked around the class, noticing that someone was still missing. "Hey, Chie, is Yukiko-san here today?"

"No," Chie said, sounding concerned. "The inn must be running her ragged... Anyway, you guys catch the interview last night? The one with the girl that saw the body? That kinda looked like Saki, didn't it?"

Yosuke nodded and brought out his mobile phone, looking a little worried.

"Yeah, I think it was her. She hasn't responded to any of my calls though..."

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of the school PA making itself known.

"Attention all students, please report to the assembly hall immediately."

An assembly? I wonder what's going on?

Obeying the disembodied voice's wishes, we all made our way to the assembly hall. There were many students whispering amongst themselves, wondering what was going on. Now I would like to say that Chie, Yosuke and I were exempt from this; that we were fine, upstanding students. But then I would by lying.

"I wonder what they're holding an assembly about?" Chie whispered to us. Yosuke stayed silent, obviously worried about his Senpai. I had no comments on the matter myself, so I kept silent too. The principal took centre stage and adjusted the microphone. Old man, bald, long white beard. You know, *that* kind of principal.

"I... regret to say that I have a terrible announcement for all of you. One of our third year students, Saki Konishi of Class 3... has passed away."

What...? Passed away?

I immediately turned my head to look at Yosuke, who looked distraught. I couldn't blame him. This news was probably the worst thing for him to hear. The principal had more to say however.

"Ms Konishi was found deceased early this morning. The reasons behind her passing are currently under investigation by the police. If they ask you for your co-operation, I urge you, as members of this school, to provide only the facts."

We had tuned out at that point. Chie and I were worried about Yosuke, who looked really down about it.

Poor Yosuke... He really liked her as well.

~ Garden of Souls ~

The day passed us by, though the melancholic air created by the news of Saki Konishi's death still hung over the school. I packed up my books and looked out the classroom window and saw a heavy rainfall covering the area.

Depressing weather for a depressing day... Would really like to see the sun.

Seeing Chie still in her seat, I reached out and poked her on the shoulder, grabbing her attention.

"How's Yosuke?" I asked, noticing how he left as soon as class was over.

"He looked really down. Saki's death must have hit him extremely hard," Chie replied while packing up her own books. "I think he's at the lockers downstairs, we can catch him if we hurry."

Leaving the classroom, we made our way to the entrance, only to overhear this lovely conversation between two female students.

"It's kinda scary, isn't it? She died in the same way as that announcer lady, didn't she?"

"First it was an antenna, now it's a telephone pole."

"Did you hear? Someone said they saw Saki on the Midnight Channel thingie last night. They said that she looked like she was totally in pain."

"Haha, looks like someone had a nightmare. The media's been broadcasting the interview with Saki non-stop, so maybe they might have had her on the brain?"

The two students walked off, continuing to gossip.

"Sheesh, it's easy to toss around theories when you're not involved," Chie said with a disgusted tone. I agreed with her. It was easy to throw around theories and speculation if you're just watching from the sidelines. It's a disgusting thing that humans tend to do.

We heard the sound of a locker closing and we turned to see Yosuke standing near the entrance. We walked tentatively over to him.

"...H-Hey, Yosuke... How are you holding up?" Very stupid question, Chie. He had just found out his not-so-kinda girlfriend had died that afternoon, you know? He was silent. It made the air around us especially awkward. Chie cleared her throat. "So, um... How about we go to Junes? Though in this rain, we might not get something to eat..."

"...There's a sale on electronics right now," Yosuke eventually said, gaining back a bit of his happy-go-lucky tone. "Who knows?" He turned to look at me with a smile. "Maybe we can find a TV big enough to fit your entire body in."

"I wasn't kidding about that!"

If it helped him get his mind off of Saki, then I was willing to bear the brunt of his teasing. We made our way to Junes underneath our umbrellas, the rain not showing any signs of stopping. We checked out the electronics section and, like Yosuke said, they were having a sale. The TV's they had there were absolutely gigantic.

"Whoa!" Chie let out, sharing my amazement. "These TV's are HUGE! And holy crap, they are expensive..." And just as quickly she

had became amazed, she became depressed. "Who buys something like this?"

"I dunno. Rich folk?" Yosuke shrugged his shoulders. "Honestly, not many people shop for TV's here. That's why we don't have clerks around."

"Isn't worth trying, I guess. Well, at least looking's free." Chie stared at the gigantic TV in front of us before turning to Yosuke. He seemed to have the same idea as Chie because he turned to look at her before the two of them walked to the TV and placed their palms on it.

"...Nope, can't get in. Figures," Yosuke said. They were trying to put their hands in the TV like I could.

"Haha, that proves it. It was all a dream," Chie said, laughing.

Don't test me, Satonaka. Or I'll show you some real magic.

"Besides, these flat screen TV's are so small, you'd just end up on the other side..." Yosuke shook his head furiously. "Argh, what am I saying?" He quickly looked at Chie. "So Chie, what kind of TV are you in the market for?"

I wasn't paying attention to their conversation. I was paying more attention to the TV in front of me. I examined it carefully, unsure of what I was actually looking for.

Hmm... It does look big enough to fit my entire body in... Why am I even considering this? Yuka, stop this. Stop it right now. You're being stupid. You should just not. Do. Anything... Ah, Goddammit!

Reaching out for the TV, I placed my palm on it. Much to my total not-shock and amazement, my hand phased through the TV, forming ripples around the area my hand entered. I blinked twice before moving to take my hand out, but I was spotted.

"Hey, Narukami, what kind of TV do you—? Uh..."

"Huh? What's wrong, Yosuke...? Wh-What?"

"I-Is her hand... inside the TV...?"

"...I-Is that a new model? Like, one with special features?"

"Hell no!"

I heard their footsteps run towards me and they spoke with panicked tones.

"You gotta be kidding me? Did you really stick your hand through the TV?" Chie asked. I continued to stare at the ripples continually being formed around my hand.

"Whoa! This is some magic trick! So, what's the witch's secret?" Yosuke asked, sounding absolutely astonished.

Hmm... Maybe I can stick more than my hand in there.

With this curious thought swimming through my mind, I leaned forward and found myself staring at a vast empty space.

"H-Hey, don't do that!" Yosuke yelled.

"Oh my God!" Chie said in complete shock.

Wow, this is vast. There's an entire world beyond here.

"There's a lot of empty space inside here, guys," I called out to them, not knowing how far sound could travel in there.

"Wh-What do you mean '*inside*'?!" Yosuke asked with a tone of disbelief.

"Wh-What do you mean '*empty space*'?!" Chie asked with a similar tone.

"Oh wow, there's an echo in there," I said to myself, noticing the noise their voices were making before a mischievous thought crossed my mind. Very unlike me, but I couldn't help myself. "ECHO!" I shouted, hearing my voice call back to me. While I was having my fun, I could hear footsteps running around in a panic outside the TV. "What are you guys doing out there? Are you

running around like headless chic-KENS?!" That was all I could get out before they tripped into my, making us all fall into the abyss of the TV.

~ Garden of Souls ~

We fell and fell and fell through the strange vastness of the TV until, eventually, we saw the ground. Chie and Yosuke landed on their behinds while I manoeuvred myself so I could safely land on my knee. I quickly scanned the area, in case there were any hostiles around, but relaxed when I didn't see anything that seemed malicious. By that time, Yosuke and Chie got back on their feet.

"Ah, I think I broke my ass..." Yosuke groaned, rubbing said ass.

"Where are we...?" Chie asked, taking in the environment around her. I took the chance to properly look around and found myself perplexed by what I said.

Is this... a studio lot? It would make sense, given the look of this platform and my surroundings.

Ignoring that, I reached around my back and patted my backpack, which somehow survived the fall.

Good... It's still there.

I then turned to look at the others.

"Are you guys alright?" I asked and got affirmative nods.

"Yeah, we're okay," Chie called out. "Ugh, can't see a thing in this fog."

Eh?

"What fog?" I asked, slightly confused. "There's no fog here."

"Are you blind or something? The fog's so thick I can barely see you," Yosuke said, which made me stop to think. They could see fog, while I couldn't. It was quite the mystery, but it was one I would have to solve another time. When we got out of there alive.

"Well, we're here now," I said. "I think we should walk... in that direction." I pointed to the west, feeling that something was going on over there.

"Eh?! You want to go exploring?!" Yosuke asked, a little sceptical of this plan.

"It's our best shot at finding a way out. So quit your bit—Eh?"

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

"What's that noise?" I asked, looking around cautiously.

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

"Is that squeaking?" Yosuke asking, looking around also.

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

The squeaking got louder and louder until I was able to determine where it was coming from. I turned to look and saw quite a sight: a... bear. Some kind of blue-furred, red and white jumpsuit wearing, big eyed bear was walking towards us. I would be shocked upon seeing such a thing. Except... I wasn't.

Had my time in Iwatodai really made me numb to this sort of thing? I guess so. Yosuke and Chie, however, were not.

"Wh-Who is that?!" Yosuke yelled, pointing a shaky finger at the bear, who stomped his foot several times, looking irritated.

"I should be the one asking that question!" the bear yelled back. "Who are you?!"

"Ahhhh!" Chie screamed. "The bear talks?!" Chie got into a fighting stance and looked at the bear with anger and a little fear. "You wanna fight?!" she yelled, which made the bear cower in fear.

"D-Don't yell at me like that..." he said meekly, a stark contrast to his aggressive tone from earlier.

He's just scared... Maybe a calm approach would be best here?

"What is this place?" I asked curiously.

"This place doesn't really have a name," the bear explained to me, a smile on his face. "I've always lived here."

"You... live here?" Yosuke asked.

"I really think you should get out of here," the bear told us. "Someone's been throwing people in here and it's causing all sorts of problems."

"Throwing people in here..." I repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"Grr, I just wish that person would think before they go and do such a thing," the bear growled, stomping his foot again. "It's been making this world all topsy-turvy."

"Actually, I have a few questions," I said to the bear. "First off... Just who are you?"

"I'm Teddie," the bear which called itself, appropriately enough, Teddie answered.

"Heh, figured it would be something like that," Yosuke said, chuckling a little.

"Second," I interrupted Yosuke, "is it foggy in here? Because I can't see it, but these people here can."

"Yeah, it is." Teddie nodded his head. "You can't se the fog...?" He waddled over to me and poked my stomach with a curious look. "Are you a Teddie as well?"

"Uh... no..." I said. My mind kept coming back to what he said about people being thrown in there, and then images flashed in my mind about what I saw on the Midnight Channel; specifically how the person on it looked like Saki. "Wait, has anyone been in here recently?" I asked. Teddie would know better than most, since he lived in this place after all.

"There was someone here a few days ago," Teddie explained with

what I assumed was his thinking face. "They've been gone since yesterday though. I know that when it's foggy in your world, the fog lifts here. That's when the Shadows get violent."

...No... No. Nonononononononononono. He did not just say what I think he said.

"When it's foggy out there, it lifts here? Shadows get violent?" Yosuke asked with a confused look before it contorted into a scowl. "Argh, this whole thing gets more confusing by the minute. What is this place anyway? It looks like a TV studio. Is something being filmed here...?" Yosuke's expression changed, as though he had a sudden revelation. "Wait, don't tell me that weird show is being filmed here?"

Teddie looked confused at the question, tilting his body a little.

"Weird show? Filmed? What does that mean?"

"Umm... I'm asking whether someone has been filming the people being thrown in here."

"...I don't get it. This world has always been like this. No one has ever done that filming thing here."

"Uh, run that by me again, if you don't mind," Chie said, sounding and looking very confused by all this.

"Only me and Shadows are here, I've told you before!" Teddie answered somewhat aggressively, which set Yosuke off.

"We don't know what these Shadow things are! Or what you are, for that matter! In fact, I think it's time you took off that ridiculous costume!" Yosuke moved forward and grabbed Teddie's head, pulling on it until it came off with an audible pop. What we saw inside made Chie and Yosuke yelp with surprise.

"What the hell?!" Yosuke yelled, pointing at Teddie, who was completely hollow inside. Teddie was flailing around helplessly. "I-It's empty inside!"

I kept a straight face and picked up Teddie's head.

"He sure is," I said calmly as I help Teddie reattach his head.

"Thank you," Teddie said, sounding appreciative.

"Yo, Narukami, does *anything* faze you?" Yosuke asked, sounding a little queasy.

"By the way, you looked a little pale back there. Are you okay?" Chie asked. I thought I had managed to hide my shock from them, but I guess not.

"...I'm fine," I told her before turning my attention to Teddie. "By the way, Teddie, what exactly is in that direction?" I pointed off to the west. Teddie looked over there as well.

"Oh, something appeared there recently. I haven't checked it out for myself, the Shadows were very aggressive the other day. It was... *beary* scary."

...Must. Resist. Urge. To punch him in the face...

"Bad pun aside, you think you can take us there?" I asked the bear, which elicited pretty interesting reactions from the others.

"Again, you want to explore this place?!" Yosuke asked me. I simply shrugged my shoulders.

"I'm curious. Something's been bugging me for a while and I want to see it for myself."

Plus, I want to see if there really are any Shadows here...

"Well, we might as well introduce ourselves. I'm Yosuke Hanamura," Yosuke introduced himself to Teddie.

"And I'm Chie Satonaka," Chie said as well. Teddie gave both of them a short wave.

"I'm Yuka Narukami," I told Teddie, who also waved at me. Teddie's eyes lit up as he pulled something out from behind him.

"Oh, here, you two will probably want to put these on," he told Chie

and Yosuke, handing them the pair of glasses he had in his hand. Yosuke and Chie looked at the objects sceptically before putting them on. Their eyes widened.

"Oh wow, the difference is like night and day!" Yosuke said, looking around. "It's like the fog doesn't even exist."

"They'll help you two walk through the fog," Teddie explained. "Yuka-chan here doesn't need the glasses. She can see just fine without them. I wonder why...?"

"That isn't important right now," I told him quickly. "Can you lead us west of here?"

~ Garden of Souls ~

I had Teddie lead us further west, despite his and the others protests. I only really had one thing to say to them: if something happens, take Teddie and get back to that TV studio-like place. When they asked about me, I told them that I would be fine. I found myself recognising the area we were walking through. I thought it looked similar from afar, but walking down the roads that were there, I saw that we were travelling through the shopping district.

"The magic concentration is really strong here," I said out loud. "This isn't normal."

"This place appeared recently. You say this place looks like your shopping district?" Teddie asked curiously.

"Yeah, it does." I nodded my head. "I've been sensing this energy for a while now, and I wanted to see for myself what it was."

"Sensing magic?" Yosuke asked with a confused tone. "What are you two talking about?"

"It has to be something close by..." I looked around, ignoring Yosuke's question. "Something like... that."

I pointed out the store we had just walked past. The magic emanating from that place was cause for concern. I hadn't felt magic that strong ever since the incident three years ago... No. It felt even

more potent here. Because while the majority of it was concentrated on that tower last time – here, it was an entire world.

"Hey... Isn't this...?" Yosuke seemed to recognise the place. I looked up at the sign and saw that the store was named '*Konishi Liquors*'.

This is Saki's place? Chie did mention that her family runs a liquor store.

"Who would go out of their way to recreate the entire shopping district here?" Chie asked, looking around. "They even got the cracks in the road."

"I don't know. This is reality for those that are here. Some other places have appeared recently as well. Things are getting so tangled, I don't know what to do," Teddie said sadly, which made us turn to look at him. He was standing several feet away from us.

"Hey, why are you standing so far away?" Yosuke asked before an angry look crossed his features. "You better not be planning to bolt at the first sign of trouble!"

"N-No, of course not!" Teddie denied with rosy cheeks. "I would never do that. I would just get in the way if I'm beside you. So I'm just standing here to act as moral support."

Right... Sure. Moral support – gotcha. And what was that about this place being reality for those that are here. That doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

I sighed and turned back to look at the store. Something felt wrong with all of this.

"Could this be where Saki disappeared?" I asked aloud and Yosuke overheard this.

"Yeah, it just might be..." He had a very saddened expression as he looked up at the sign.

"...Yosuke..." Chie said softly, sympathy laced in her tone. "Saki didn't deserve to die like that... I'm sorry."

"What are you apologising for?" Yosuke asked without turning to look at her. "If this is where Senpai died then I owe her to find out exactly what happened... I owe her that much." He walked towards the entrance but was stopped when we heard a growling sound.

"W-Wait, Yosuke! They're here!" Teddie called out to Yosuke, who turned to look at him.

"What?"

"Shadows...! I had a feeling they would attack!" Teddie looked around fearfully.

I swore under my breath and immediately went to grab my bag from behind my back and unzipped it. I brought out one of the few weapons I possessed: Grimoire Animus. It's a magical tome that was given to me by my mother. A book of souls, so to speak. Placing my hand over the tome, it opened on its own as it cycled through the pages.

Come on, come on! Where are you?! Dammit, I can't believe this! I thought it was over but these things are still alive... I guess it's to be expected. As long as there's darkness in human hearts... No matter. I'll just do what I always do. Kill every last one of them.

I looked at the entrance of the store, which had opened up on its own. As Teddie said, the Shadows were here and they were coming out in force, drawn to us like moths to a flame. They transformed from their regular, puddle-like forms into flying orbs with tongues hanging out. Heh, three years and their designs were as ridiculous as ever.

The book had reached the page I was searching for and the card I was very familiar with rose into the air.

...Alright, old friend. Time to fight again.

"Izanagi!" I called out as I closed the book, smashing the card. The Persona known as Izanagi materialised and blocked an incoming attack from a Shadow, pushing it back. "Kill them all!" I ordered the Persona, who was more than capable of carrying out that order.

Using his lightning bolts, he fried most of the Shadows on our left. Using his weapon, he chopped the Shadows on our right in half. One by one, the Shadows fell to Izanagi's might. Chie and Yosuke looked on as the Persona cut through Shadow after Shadow with awe. Every swing of his weapon, every lightning bolt that struck, was a display of great power and was something to be respected, admired and feared.

Some Shadows caught sight of us unguarded and tried to rush forward. Chie and Yosuke didn't have weapons so they were in the most danger. Izanagi realised this and jumping in front of us, blocking the Shadows mid-attack and threw them off. He rushed forward and struck the Shadows several times, dodging some of their attacks before letting loose with a lightning strike, taking out the majority of them that were there.

The fight only lasted a minute, but it felt like five to me. As silence fell upon the battlefield, I looked up at Izanagi and smiled.

"Good work," I said to him before turning to the others.

"Wow!" Teddie yelled as he walked up to me. "You're amazing, Sensei! I never thought you could do something like that! I am one impressed bear."

"Me either," Yosuke whispered, still in shock it seemed over seeing that battle. "What exactly is that thing?" He pointed at Izanagi shakily. My face remained neutral as I answered.

"This is Izanagi. He's what's called a Persona," I told the two of them. "And what I just fought are Shadows... My enemy."

"Your enemy...?" Chie asked, still in a state of shock. "What are you talking about?"

"It's difficult to explain," I replied. "I have a... history with these things." I was about to elaborate further but I found myself being interrupted by a series of voices, echoing all around us.

"I wish Junes would go under..."

"It's all because of that store..."

We all looked around but were unable to find the source of the voices. Yosuke looked unnerved by this, not that I could blame him.

"Wh-What...?" he let out before the voices spoke again.

"I heard that Konishi-san's daughter is working there."

"Oh my... How could she, with her family's business suffering like it is...?"

"I heard their sales have gone downhill because of Junes."

"S-Stop it..." Yosuke looked panicked at this point. Hearing all these accusations thrown in practically his direction didn't help matters at all. Chie and I looked at him, wondering if we should say anything, or rather, if we *could* say anything.

"That poor father... to have his own daughter working for the enemy."

"What a troublesome child."

"...Hey, Ted," Yosuke called out to Teddie. "You said this is reality for those that are here, right? So... does that mean that this was Senpai's reality when she wandered in here?"

"I... only know about what's over here," Teddie answered, giving no real explanation about what that actually meant. Yosuke turned to face the entrance.

"Fine..." he declared. "Whatever's going on here... We'll find out ourselves."

~ Garden of Souls ~

We entered the liquor store. I had Izanagi follow close behind in case any Shadows got the bright idea of attacking us while we investigated. The inside of the store was dark. Many alcohol bottles lined the shelves and the place in general was a mess. We didn't get very far before we heard another voice speak out.

"Dammit, not again..." Yosuke growled as the voice started to speak.

It was a man, and he sounded angry.

"Saki, how many times do I have to tell you?!"

"I-Is this... Senpai's dad...?" Yosuke asked before the voice spoke again.

"You know what the neighbours say about you, right?! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You're the eldest daughter of a family who's owned this store for generations! Is it the money? Or did you meet some guy there? Just tell me why you have to work *there* of all places!"

"I... I can't believe this..." Yosuke said, looking down at the floor. "She seemed like she was having fun at work... She never said anything like this to me... You're telling me *this* was how Senpai really saw things?!"

He spotted something on a nearby table and ran over to it. Chie, Teddie and I followed him and watched as he picked up a scrap of a photo that was lying there.

"It's the photo we took the other day with the other part timers at Junes... Why is it cut up like this?"

I took a look and the scrap of the photo showed Saki smiling, with Yosuke standing right beside her.

"I... never had the chance to say it..." We all heard another voice speak. This voice, however, belonged to someone that was already dead.

"Is that... Senpai's voice?!" Yosuke asked, looking up toward the ceiling. We could only stand there and listen.

"I always wanted to tell Hana-chan..."

"Huh...? Me...?"

"...that he was a real pain in the ass."

Yosuke looked shocked at Saki's words, which were like a bullet

straight to the heart. She had more to say, which I felt would only make things worse.

"I was nice to him because he was the store manager's son, that's all. But he takes it completely the wrong way and gets all enthusiastic... What a dip."

"P-Pain in the ass...?"

"Who cares about Junes, anyway? Because of that store, our business is ruined, my parents hate me, the neighbours talk behind my back... I wish everything would just disappear."

"I-It's a lie... It can't be... Senpai's not like that!"

"It's—" A sniff like someone faking a sob sounded out. "—so sad... I feel so sorry for myself. Boo hoo..."

...What...?

That was Yosuke's voice that just spoke. But those words didn't come from the Yosuke that stood beside us. We turned to look and my worst fears were realised.

"Actually, *I'm* the one who thinks everything's a pain in the ass. Hahaha..."

This was Yosuke we were looking at. He had Yosuke's voice, Yosuke's face, Yosuke's clothes, but his eyes... His eyes showed that he wasn't human. Bright yellow, they were, and I knew exactly what he was.

"Yosuke, calm down," I immediately told him, but my voice seemed to had fallen on deaf ears.

"Wh-What?! There are *two* Yosukes...?!" Chie couldn't quite believe what we were seeing, neither could Yosuke and Teddie. The Shadow walked closer to us.

"Who are you?!" Yosuke asked angrily. "I-I would never think that."

"Hahaha! Yeah, right. How long are you going to keep deluding

yourself?" the Shadow Yosuke asked with a demented smile. "Screw the shopping district, and Junes too! You're sick of everything, especially living out in the sticks!"

"What're you saying...? That's not true, I—"

"You put on a good show of being carefree and happy-go-lucky because you're so terrified of being alone. The more the merrier, right? You've gotta be surrounded by people to block out the pain of isolation. And what's this about checking out this world for Saki-senpai's sake? HAH! I know the real reason you came snooping."

"S-Stop it!" It wasn't the best situation to find ourselves in. If I couldn't get through to him... Well, bad things would happen.

"Yosuke, you need to calm down—!"

"Hahahahaha! Why so panicked? I thought I was just spouting bullshit! Or maybe... I *do* know everything you're thinking! Why's that? Because I *am* you! You just came because it sounded like a good time! What else is there to do out in this shithole? A world inside the TV – now that's exciting! You didn't have a single other reason for coming here, did you?!"

"That's not true... Stop... Stop it..."

Shadow Yosuke's expression changed from a demented smirk to a malicious scowl.

"You're just trying to act like a big shot. And if all went well, hey, maybe you could even be a hero! And that Senpai you were so sweet on? Her death was the perfect excuse!"

"That's not true! What are you?! Who are you?!"

Shadow Yosuke chuckled darkly.

"I already told ya. I'm you... Your Shadow... There's nothing I don't know about you!"

I can't get a word in! I have to stop this now!

"That's enou—!"

"Screw that! I don't know you! You can't be me, you son of a bitch!"

It was too late. Now that he had said that, there was no stopping him.

"Hahahahahahaha! That's right! Say it again!" Shadow Yosuke goaded Yosuke on, who staggered back in fear.

"You're not me... You're nothing like me!"

We all stared at the Shadow, waiting for his response. Though I already knew what it would be, and silently ordered Izanagi to cover Chie as best he could.

"...Heh. Yeah, that's right... I am me now. I'm not you any more, see?"

I was prepared for this and gripped the Grimoire as tightly as I could. Izanagi got in front of all of us while the Shadow made its transformation. When we were able to see through the light it created, we all got a sight of its true form. His Shadow took the form of a frog with a whimsical body on top. His hands were gigantic, a scarf flew about and his eyes were shuriken. Appearances didn't matter in the grand scheme of things though. It was a Shadow, through and through.

"I am a Shadow," Shadow Yosuke called out. "The true self. I'll crush everything that bores me, starting with you!" He was talking to me. He suddenly used a wind attack, which so happened to be Izanagi's weakness.

"Shit!" I watched as Izanagi slammed into the wall while I dodged out of the way. Yosuke, Chie and Teddie ran behind the desk. "Keep him off us!" I ordered the Persona as he got back onto his feet and jumped towards the Shadow.

I turned to look at the others who were visibly shaken by what has happened, Yosuke especially.

"Wh-What is that thing...?" Yosuke asked, sounding frightened.

"Like it said – a Shadow," I said calmly to him. I peeked over the table to see Izanagi dodging Shadow Yosuke's wind strikes "Stay here. I'll take care of it." I ran to the battlefield which had transformed from the liquor store to some kind of arena.

"Narukami!"

"Sensei!"

I ignored the two and ran out to the Shadow, who laughed in my face.

"Hahaha! What an eyesore!" he yelled, using another wind spell that Izanagi and I dodged. "You think you can beat me? With that pathetic weapon?!"

"A weapon that's going to knock your ass right into next week!" I rebutted with a cocky smirk. "I've fought your kind before."

"...Hmph. In that case, I'll end this quickly. How long can you survive this?!" I stayed on guard as he built up an incredible amount of energy. The air shifted and the dust was blown about the room as the Shadow charged a Garu spell that was sure to hurt. I knew what was coming, and I didn't like it.

"Izanagi! Stop him!" Izanagi flew over and struck him once, twice, but that didn't seem to do anything. He jumped back and charged a Zio spell, working overtime to catch up to its level.

C'mon, this has gotta work...!

He let loose but the spell did absolutely nothing to the Shadow. I couldn't believe it.

What?!

Shadow Yosuke jumped and smashed into the ground, sending a shockwave that sent both Izanagi and myself crashing into a liquor cabinet. Many alcohol bottles came crashing down and breaking against the ground. A few of them broke against my back, it's contents spilling over me.

Ugh... Great, that smell won't come out for ages.

I looked up at Izanagi, who broke apart and transformed back into a card. The card disappeared back into the book; safe, but I wouldn't be able to use Izanagi again for a while.

Dammit...

I, relatively uninjured, looked up at the Shadow. He was laughing uproariously, taunting me.

"What are you going to do now?! Without that poor excuse of a Persona, you're weak! Useless!"

...I don't have a choice. I have to use it.

"...I don't need a Persona to take you down," I said, getting up onto my feet.

"With what? You don't even have a weapon!"

"...Is that so?" I asked, smiling. "You truly are stupid. In that case, I'll just need to show you."

Quickly snatching up a bottle, I threw it at the nearby light that illuminated the arena. The light broke, leaving the entire area in darkness.

"Where'd she go?!"

"Sensei, I can't see you! Where are you?!"

"Narukami, where are you?!"

I have to be quick. That light won't stay out for too long.

By the time the light came back, I was well out of the way and was preparing to use one of the other weapons I had. I closed my eyes.

Alright... Here goes nothing... ***Vis Vires, Scindo, Anima!***

With those words spoken in my mind, I opened my eyes and the world in front of me changed. I could see many things. The many

threads holding this fragile world together. I could see those threads and, with my power, cut through them. Including the Shadow that was before me.

The Shadow spotted me and, judging from the way he shifted, knew what was coming.

"Stay back!"

He tried to strike me with his oversized hands but I dodged out of the way. From the corner of my eye, I saw a weapon hiding behind the counter. Dodging another strike which sent pieces of the ground flying around me, I ran towards the weapon and grabbed it.

Once I had that small knife in my hands, I was able to start fighting back. Seeing the weak points of structures and other objects, I can cut through them to completely destroy them. Which was what I did to the support pillars holding up the light fixtures. The entire thing came down with a thunderous crash, the noise drowning out the Shadow's screams as it landed on him. I had gotten safely out of the way.

The Shadow forced the object off of him and tried to attack me again out of blind rage. I kept calm and easily dodged. I saw the opening I needed: the Shadow's thread of life, waiting to be cut. He used a Garu spell which I was unprepared for. It struck me, sending me flying out of the store and onto my back. I quickly got up.

Some Shadows were there, probably lured by the fighting and the presence of a more powerful Shadow. They aimed to block my path, but I wasn't going to have any of it. I rushed forward, flipping the knife so I held it in a reverse grip and slashed through the Shadow in front of me.

It didn't get a chance to respond, let along let out any sort of pained scream. It dissolved into a black mist, its existence denied – completely erased from this world. I looked at the other Shadows. I saw their threads and focused on them. I ran forward, my hand keeping a firm grip of the knife.

I cut through the Shadows as I ran and quickly made my back inside

the building. Shadow Yosuke was surprised to see that I had gotten back to it that quickly and started to panic. I ran towards it, dodging the Garu spells thrown at me. He hesitated for a brief moment as he saw me closer than he probably thought I would get.

That hesiation lasted but a mere second, but it was all I needed. Aiming directly for the weak point, I drove the knife as deep as I could into his body before I pulled it out and slashed right at the thread. I severed it completely.

"Damn you to hell!"

The Shadow disappeared while I staggered back away from it. The battle was over. I had won. Silence fell over the area for a while, the others having no clue what they could possibly say. I breathed in and out deeply, taking greedy gulps of air. That was my first major fight in over three years. It was understandable that I would be a *little* exhausted.

...Dammit... I used too much...

I collapsed onto my knees.

"Sensei!" I heard Teddie shout as footsteps ran towards me. "Are you okay, Sensei?!"

I didn't say a word, but I did lift my head to look. I saw that the Shadow had returned to its human form. Unlike the Shadows I fought outside, powerful Shadows are only defeated when either the human it spawned from accepts their flaws and admits that it's a part of them, or the human is killed. By the Shadow or otherwise.

The others saw this as well. Yosuke in particular looked really scared of it.

"You... You're... not me..." Yosuke said, still denying this fundamental truth.

"That thing came from you, Yosuke..." Teddie told him. "You have to admit it... or it'll go berserk again."

"Everyone's the same inside, Yosuke..." I said, out of energy and out

of breath. I tried to stand up but my body just couldn't take it. Yosuke realised this and raised a hand in front of me, telling me that it was alright. He walked to the Shadow, whose face showed no malice or hatred.

"...Dammit... It hurts to face yourself," he said before looking his Shadow in the eye. "I knew it wasn't lying... But I was so ashamed, I didn't want to admit it... The truth is, you're me... And I'm you... When you get down to it, all of this is me."

His Shadow gave him the briefest of smiles and nodded before disappearing. A figure appeared in front of him, floating in the air – though I couldn't see him properly before it transformed into a card.

That's... his Persona...

Yosuke lets it float in his hands for a few moments before it disappeared as well. He had overcome himself and obtained the facade that would let him face the evils of the world: a Persona. I could feel my vision blur and darkened before I collapsed; the sound of my last breathy gasp before I fell unconscious reaching their ears. The last thing I heard before my body shut down completely was their worried yells.

"Narukami!"

~ ***Author's Note*** ~

Here's the first fight scene of the story, and it was a rather fun one to write. Now it's soundtrack time! To hear what I was listening to while writing the chapter, head over to my profile, scroll down until you reach the soundtrack section and you'll find a handy dandy little link to a playlist of songs I've compiled for your listening pleasure. The track in this chapter will be handily tilted '*Track 1*' in the notes to the right of the song. I'll be adding more tracks as the story goes on, so check back regularly.

With that said, I hope you've enjoyed this chapter and hope to see you for the next one.

Next Time – Chapter V: What She Saw

Chapter V

~ ***Chapter V: What She Saw*** ~

...Wh... What happened...?

My eyes slowly opened to a bright light, and my nose smelt the stench of alcohol. I wondered where I was and what happened to me. That's when I remembered the battle that occurred. My eyes widened as I got up in a panic.

"Oh, Sensei's awake!" I heard Teddie call out, which made me stop and look around. I was back at the TV lot-like place.

The others must have brought me back here...

Remembering the battle more clearly, I realised that I had to use that ability of mine. I sighed, realising that I was going to have to explain exactly what I did.

"Narukami, you alright?" Yosuke asked, still wearing the glasses Teddie gave him. I looked around and saw Chie sitting down near me. I nodded my head.

"...Yeah, I'm okay now," I told him and attempted to stand up but I ended up falling back down. I was still exhausted.

"Take it easy," Chie said, sounding worried. "You collapsed after you killed that Shadow thing. We were worried that you wouldn't wake up."

"Goodness, Sensei, you are full of surprises!" Teddie yelled. I have never seen something like that before!"

"You and me both, Ted..." Yosuke shook his head. "What exactly did you do, Narukami?"

Well, expected that question.

"...It's an ability I have," I started to explain. "I can see the threads of

life that are strewn throughout the world, and if I have a sharp object – like a knife or a sword – I can cut through it, destroying it completely. My mother used to have this ability but she lost it after the war."

"War? What war?" Yosuke asked curiously.

"That's for me to know," I snapped at him, quickly and harshly. "I'll tell you about it if, and only if, it becomes important."

That shot down that line of conversation rather quickly. I tried to stand up again, but Chie had to help me up.

"Hey, Teddie. You said that this world is reality for those who enter, right?" Yosuke asked. "So the weird shopping district we saw, that was... Did that place appear because of Saki? I guess what I'm asking is... Do these places form because of the people who wander in here?"

"I don't know. It's never happened before," Teddie said. "But that's probably where that Saki girl was when the Shadows attacked her."

"Wait, are you saying that this world kills them?" I asked, piecing together what he's saying.

"The fog does lift here sometimes, and the Shadows get really violent. I always get scared; I have to hide when it happens," Teddie explained for us. "I sensed people here twice before. But both of them disappeared when the fog lifted..."

"So let me get this straight..." Yosuke pushed up his glasses. "Senpai and, I'm guessing, that Yamano lady were thrown in here. Both of their bodies were found roughly the same way. Since they couldn't get out, they wandered off. After a while, that Shadow thing came out of them, then they go berserk and attack them like it tried to attack me. Does that sound about right?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure." Teddie nodded his head. "You were lucky you weren't here when the fog lifted, it would have been huge trouble for you. Sensei was also here to help you, so you were lucky for that as well."

"Dammit!" Yosuke yelled. "Senpai and that announcer... They were all alone... They had no one to help them!"

"Yosuke..." Teddie said, his eyes showing sadness before they perked up. "They disappeared when the fog lifted, but they were safe until then. No Shadows attacked them. They attacked us though..."

"That's because of me," I told them. "They recognised me as a threat." I turned to look at Yosuke. "Since you have a Persona now, they'll be coming after you as well."

"It might be dangerous," Teddie said. "But with both your strengths, we might be able to fight them. We might be able to save people!"

"Are you saying, if anyone else gets thrown in here, we can save them before they disappear?!" Yosuke asked hurriedly. "Like how you guys saved me?!"

"...I'm not so sure, but it's worth a try," I said slowly.

I'm not having any more deaths on my conscience...

"We need to catch the one who's throwing people in here and make them stop," Yosuke told us. "Though... I'm worried about Satonaka. She's a good fighter but I'm not sure she can fight those Shadow things."

"Oh no, if you think I'm staying out of this, you have another thing coming!" Chie yelled. "How can I go on living my days knowing that this is happening and I'm not doing anything about it?!"

"U-Um... Can I ask something too?" Teddie spoke up and we gave him our attention. "If Shadows are born from humans, what was Teddie born from?"

"You don't even know where you came from? How should we know?" Yosuke asked, which made Teddie frown.

"I know some things. Mostly about this world... But I don't know anything about myself. To be honest, I never thought about it until now..."

No wonder we couldn't get a straight answer out of him...

"Will you guys... come back here...?"

"We just said that we're going after the Shadows," I told him. "We're going to end up coming back here sooner or later." I tried to take a step forward and ended up stumbling. Chie was still there to catch me, fortunately.

"We should get Narukami out of here," Yosuke said, looking around. "This place isn't safe in her condition."

"I'm fine!" I objected. "I'm just... a little exhausted..."

"Yeah, I bet," he fired back sarcastically. "That ability of yours must have taken a lot out of you..."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever you say." He waved his hand dismissively and then looked around again. "Uh... how exactly are we supposed to get out of here?"

"Oh!" Teddie walked around us. "One express ticket back to your world, coming right up!" He stomped his foot a few times and a stack of TV's appeared in front of us. We all walked over, a little confused.

"You'll need to come in at the same place every time if you want to meet up with me," Teddie explained. I took it to mean the TV in Junes. "Sure, you can enter through another TV, but there's no guarantee that I'll find you. And then you'd be dooooomed..."

"Alright." Yosuke nodded before looking at the stacked TVs. "Okay... Need to make sure there aren't any customers or employees around..."

"Okay, alright! Go go go go go go! Squiiish!" Teddie said, pushing us towards the TVs.

"Ah, HEY! Watch where those hands are touching!" Chie yelled.

"Hey, cut it out, bear—Whoa!" Yosuke yelled before we fell into the

TVs.

~ Garden of Souls ~

When I was able to see again, we were back in the electronics department of Junes. The familiar jingle that blared throughout the store was the best thing in the world to me at that moment.

"Chie, can you help Narukami back to her house?" Yosuke asked Chie, who nodded. "I'm completely wiped out... I'm gonna head home, soak in the shower for a while and get some rest... I think... I'm gonna sleep well tonight." He shook his head and gave us his first real smile since the announcement of Saki's death. "Hehe... Well, see you two tomorrow." With that, he walked off.

"Alright, let's get you back home," Chie told me with a grunt as she helped me up onto my feet, slinging my arm around her shoulder. "Jeez, you reek."

"Thanks for that," I said sarcastically.

Chie helped me walk through the streets of Inaba towards my uncle's house. The streets were mostly empty, being the middle of the evening after all. Students were probably either doing homework or other stuff.

"...What you did back there was incredible," Chie said with awe. I wondered what she could have meant but I quickly realised she was talking about the Demon's Eyes. That isn't the actual name of the ability. It was something my mother came up with when she possessed the ability. I had no clue what the true name of it was at the time.

"It's nothing special," I brushed off. "I used it because I had no other choice."

"But still..."

We were walking along the road beside the riverbank when Chie turned her head to look to her left. She gasped, which drew my attention to where she was looking. A familiar looking black-haired girl was sitting on a bench.

"Yukiko!" Chie called out, helping me walk over to where she was.

"Chie!" Yukiko said back, then she looked at me. "Narukami! Are you alright?!" she asked, sounding worried.

"I'm fine," I told her. "I'm just a little exhausted, that's all."

"And you smell... Is that alcohol?"

"Ah, that. I had a stupid accident at Junes. Thankfully I didn't knock over that many bottles, but all of the ones I did smashed against me."

"Well... If that's all it is, then I'm glad you're alright." She nodded. Chie and I took a seat opposite her. "Are you surprised to see me dressed this way?" she asked me. She was wearing a kimono instead of her school uniform or the clothes she wore on her days off. "My parents sent me out on an errand... Um... Are you getting used to your new town and school?" she asked me awkwardly.

"If I have to be completely honest... I like this place," I responded. "It's quiet, peaceful... Something like that is very rare for me so I'm glad to be here."

Though given recent events... How long will that peace last?

"Really...?" Yukiko smiled. I could see why people think so highly of her; that smile of hers was beautiful, and it could calm the most frantic of hearts. "But it must be difficult, moving to a place you know nothing about."

"I'm used to it."

"I've never been out of Inaba, so I wouldn't know what transferring to a new school is like."

"I've only done it a few times, the first time was three years ago," I told her, without giving details as to why. She didn't pry.

"Oh! Are you getting along with Chie?" She nodded her head towards said Chie. "I mean, I always leave early, so... Umm..."

Hmm. I wonder what she seems so nervous about?

"Yeah, I would say that we're getting along," I responded, trying to sound cheerful.

"That's good." Yukiko seemed relieved to hear me say that. "Chie's really supportive, you know. It's always her that gives me the little push I need."

"C'mon, Yukiko! There's no need to praise me like that," Chie said bashfully, rubbing the back of her neck. Yukiko's eyes suddenly widened a little.

"Oh, I should probably get going. I need to make tomorrow's arrangements with the head chef. Our inn can't function without me right now." Yukiko stood up and began to walk off. "I hope you're feeling one hundred percent by tomorrow, Narukami."

We waited until she was out of sight before we got up and continued our journey to my uncle's house. About fifteen minutes later, we finally made it back. I leaned against the door for support.

"Thanks for helping me get here," I said to Chie, who smiled up at me.

"Don't mention it. It's the least I can do, to thank you for saving our lives back there. Oh!" She quickly brought out a bag that she carried – my bag – and opened it up. She pulled out Grimoire Animus and showed it to me. "Here! I know it's yours, but I would think you would have been able to carry it in your state."

How could I forget about this?

I took the bag off her hands and silently nodded. My way of saying thanks to her. I watched as she ran off to the west, in the direction of her house I would take it. Turning back to face the door, I slid it open.

~ Garden of Souls ~

Entering the Dojima residence, I took notice of the fact that my uncle was there that night. Probably had some off-time; maybe that Adachi

person was covering for him. I didn't know all the details, but regardless, I spoke up.

"Hi, uncle," I said tiredly, taking a seat opposite Nanako. Dojima was a trained detective, so he was able to pick up on my fatigue very easily. Then again, a child would have been able to spot someone that tired. Not to mention the smell.

"You smell weird," Nanako pointed out.

"Had a bit of a accident at Junes," I told her the answer I prepared in case I was asked about this. "Bottles of alcohol fell on me. I'm okay though."

"...Hey, Nanako, do you mind if I speak to your cousin alone for five minutes?" Dojima asked his daughter, who nodded and walked upstairs. Dojima grabbed the remote for the TV and turned the channel to the news which was doing a report on Saki's death.

"Our next story is an update in our ongoing report on the bizarre murders occurring in Inaba. At around 7 AM, local high school student Saki Konishi was found dead in Inaba's residential area. Since the body was positioned similarly to the last victim, and since Ms Konishi was the one who discovered the body, the Police are proceeding under the assumption that this may be a serial murder case related to the death of Mayumi Yamano. The coroner's report has established Ms Konishi's time of death at around 1 AM last night. The body went unnoticed until this morning as a result of the heavy fog blanketing the area."

An hour after seeing the Midnight Channel then...

Dojima sighed and stood up.

"You look exhausted," he pointed out. "Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"...Sure," I told him. "Cream and two sugars, please."

"Heh, you're just like Nanako. That's how she takes her coffee."

I found the idea of six-year-old little Nanako drinking coffee to be a

little bit funny, if I had to be honest. I watched as Dojima prepared two cups and sat them down on the table. He took a seat to my left. For a while, there wasn't much in the way of conversation. Until he started to speak about the murder cases, almost like he was talking to himself. I could tell that he was addressing me however.

"It's a strange state of affairs," he said. "Two bodies; one hanging from an antenna, the other from a telephone pole. Both gave no clear indication of any bodily damage. We can't even tell if this is an accident or a homicide. No evidence to go off of either. If it is a serial murder case, then the culprit has to be someone in Inaba... That's the conclusion a normal police officer would make, but... Our family is anything but normal."

"...Uncle, do you remember what happened seventeen years ago?" I asked him, taking a sip out of my cup. He nodded his head.

"Yeah... That damn war." He took a drink out of his own cup. "Left Roppongi in ruins, and yet that battle has fallen to the annuals of history. Not many know about it, or what actually happened in the war itself... You used that ability of yours, didn't you?"

"What gave it away?" I wasn't exactly shocked that he knew about it, so I spoke with an even tone.

"There are tell-tale signs," he explained. "There's an air around you that doesn't seem normal; you're exhausted, and you're also carrying that book." He pointed out the bag I had set down beside me. The book was slightly visible, since I didn't zip it up properly. "You wouldn't be carrying that around with you unless you were expecting trouble. Your mother was the same way."

Well... He's right about that.

"...It's coming, isn't it?" he asked me, his voice calm and his eyes unsure.

"I don't know. It's been seventeen years... Mother's the only one who knows exactly what was in that temple. And she hasn't said a word about it since that incident in Iwatodai." I looked out the glass door. "I don't know what's going on in this town, but something big is

about to happen."

Our conversation was interrupted by the news once again – this time, it was a special on the Amagi Inn.

"Amagi Inn, located upstream of Samegawa River, is the town's oldest historical landmark. Vacationers are known to travel surprising distances in order to visit its open-air, radium rich hot springs. After the incident with Ms Yamano, the manager has stepped aside, leaving her daughter to fill her shoes."

Yukiko? So that's what she meant by the inn not being able to function without her.

"In other words, she's a manager that's still in high school. Now that has a nice ring to it... Let's see if we can get an interview with her. Excuse me!" The camera spun and stopped when it caught sight of Yukiko, who was still wearing her kimono. The reporter ran up to her.

"Hmm...? Um... Are you speaking to me?" Yukiko asked, sounding uncomfortable.

"We've heard you're the new manager. Is it true you're still in high school?"

"Oh, well, I'm only filling in temporarily..."

"Someday though... That aside, wow! You're looking gorgeous in that kimono. You must have a lot of male visitors."

"Huh? No, umm..."

The reporters ramblings continued to get further and further off-topic. Dojima and I decided to finish our conversation.

"...You think it's *them* that's causing the murders?" Dojima asked. I knew full well what he was talking about and nodded.

"I had a run-in with them today," I told him. "The events leading up to that were as strange as the murders themselves. You heard of the Midnight Channel?"

"That rumour floating about? Yeah, I know of it. I thought it was just a childish urban legend... You think otherwise?"

"Yeah, it's not just an interesting rumour. When you stare at a TV alone, at midnight, on a rainy night, you might see someone on the screen. The person shown will die if we don't do something... I'm sorry to say this, but the police might not be able to do much."

"...I know." Dojima let out a sigh. "And that's what irritates me the most... I think you're more capable of fighting those things than I am. I'll do what I can on my side to catch this perp... Be careful."

He finished his drink and stood up.

"Oh, and make sure to have a shower. And wash your uniform as well. It really reeks."

With one last crack at me, he went upstairs, leaving me to my thoughts. As I watched the steam rise from the still warm mug, I thought about what we discussed. Specifically, the war that my mother fought in all those years ago.

...What exactly did you see that day, mother...?

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